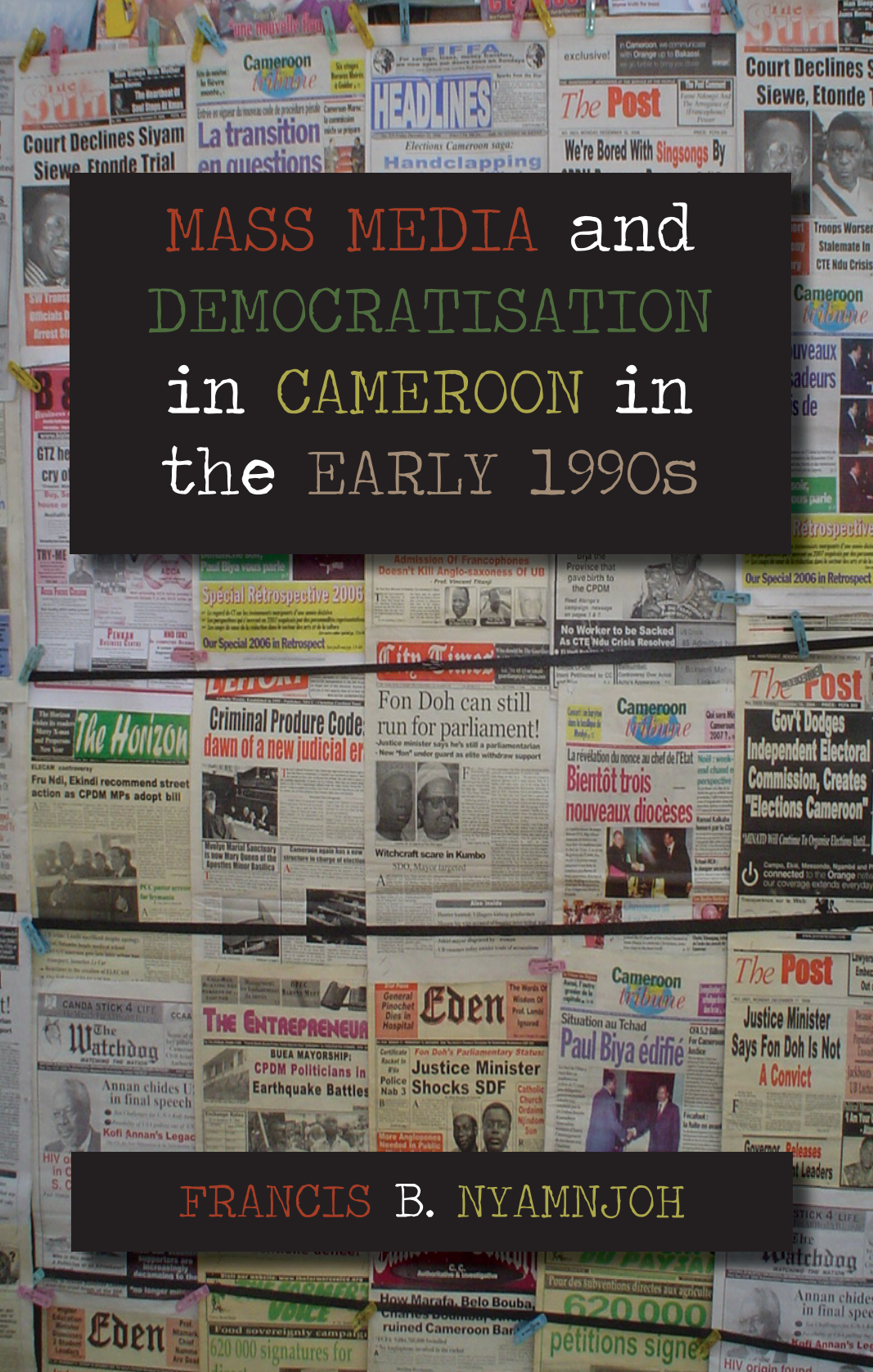




MASS MEDIA and DEMOCRATISATION in CAMEROON in the EARLY 1990s

FRANCIS B. NYAMNJOH

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**Mass Media
&
Democratisation
in
Cameroon in the Early 1990s**

Francis B. Nyamnjoh



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Preface

This study on “Mass Media and Democratisation in Cameroon” can be seen as yet another step in the efforts of the Friedrich-Ebert Foundation in Cameroon to help towards an understanding of the relationship between a sound media environment and the democratisation process. For a number of years today, the Friedrich-Ebert Foundation has tried to assist in the development of the media in Cameroon through studies, research, conferences and seminars on media-related subjects and various training activities for media practitioners.

The present study by Dr. Francis Nyamnjoh marks, in essence, the Foundation’s objective to evaluate and value the links between media development and democratisation in Cameroon. If one agrees that media development and the level of freedom of the press, in a certain way, can function as an important indicator for the level of the democratic development of a country, and that free and independent media are an indispensable part of a democratic society, this study provides an excellent overview of the state of the art of the Cameroonian society and the difficulties involved in establishing democratic instruments and principles.

Based on the results of the study, the basic question of the role of the media in the democratisation process was answered in an ambivalent way: The study shows that the media play a significant role in the democratisation process, but a positive role has yet to be developed by both press and government. Government still has to provide a stringent, operational legal framework – even after the National Forum on Communication, and the revision of the Freedom of Mass Communication law – which regulates media, and makes the court the sole and independent legal institution to deal with the media, and not one that controls and censors the media by a selective and not so transparent application of the law, as analysed in this study. The media, both audio-visual and print,

have, on their part, to develop a professional approach. As the media still appear to be divided along tribal and ethnic lines, along positions linked to government and opposition policies, a professional media environment cannot develop, and henceforth can hardly deliver inputs in the democratisation process.

The work of Francis Nyamnjoh presents a detailed and precise overview on five years of media development in Cameroon. It clearly states government's problems with the newly developed "fourth power" but also clearly shows the partially lacking comprehension by journalists and editors when it comes to definition of their role and their function in a democratic society. The study also clearly highlights that besides a functional legal framework, and adequate training institutions, an institutional framework (associations, unions, representation of editors, etc.) based on interest groups, is necessary to improve standards of professionalism and to develop a code of ethics. There is still too much politics and too little journalism in the arena.

Michael Hackenbruch
Resident Representative Friedrich-Ebert Foundation,
Cameroon, at the time of the study

Introduction

This study titled **Mass Media and Democratisation in Cameroon in the Early 1990s**, has been realised thanks to funding by the Friedrich-Ebert Foundation, and thanks in particular, to Mr Michael Hackenbruch, former resident representative of the Friedrich-Ebert Foundation in Cameroon.

(i) Objectives and Relevance

The study was started in April 1994 and completed in June 1995. Its objective was to examine the role of the mass media in the democratic process in Cameroon between 1990 and 1994. The basic assumption was that for the mass media to play a significant and positive role in the democratisation of Cameroon: (a) media institutions and practitioners must operate within a political and legal environment that allows them the freedom to inform the public on the virtues of democracy; (b) the economic and financial situation of the media and practitioners must be favourable for such a task; and (c) the media and media practitioners must be professional in their collection, treatment and dissemination of information relevant to democracy, and must seek to excel as objective mediators in the democratic debate and struggle.

The study was intended to be both a measure of tolerance in the society at large and an x-ray of the practice of journalism as a profession in Cameroon at the dawn of multipartyism and democratisation. It is hoped that this research will contribute towards a better understanding of the democratic process in Cameroon, and that it might serve as an impetus for greater comparative research on the mass media and democracy in Africa.

(ii) Research Design and Hypotheses

The basic question in the study is that of the contribution of the mass media towards democratisation in Cameroon. To avoid being misled by declarations that do not reflect reality, the study has sought to understand both the *de jure* and the *de facto* situations of the mass media and democratisation in the country. It has also sought, where and whenever necessary, to match statements of intent either by media practitioners, politicians or administrators, with actual practice.

Definition of concepts

By mass media in this study, we mean radio, television and the press as found in Cameroon. By democratisation we mean all the efforts being made to introduce, encourage and live a democratic culture and society. In broad terms, indicators of democracy are tolerance for alternative views and ways, transparency and participation in decision making for all, and respect for basic human rights and dignity. At a national level, democratisation, in concrete terms, can be measured through the following questions: (a) how collective is the determination of law and policy? (b) is there equality in rights and dignity to all? (c) are decisions reached by majority vote after public debate? (d) how representative is parliament? (e) how separated are powers and how effective are the checks and balances between the different instances of power (i.e. executive, legislative, judiciary)? (f) how effective is the rule of law? (g) is there protection of minorities? (h) how free and accessible are the mass media?

The role of the media in democratisation can be measured by seeking to know whether or not the media: (a) are themselves adequately informed and educated on the importance of democratic pluralism, (b) have socialised and assisted society towards a democratic consensus or commonality of democratic values, (c) have assisted in reducing

social tensions and cleavages in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Cameroon. In short, what have the media done to adopt and live the democratic culture and to promote democracy as a way of life in Cameroon? It is assumed that in the past the media could not play this role because of the restrictive legal and political environments in which they operated.

Hypotheses

In social sciences the application of the term 'hypothesis' has tended to be limited to quantitative research, because of the assumption that the more mathematical or statistical research is analysed, the more objective it becomes. This restrictive definition or usage, ignores to a large extent the aspect of human life which cannot be reduced to or stated in simple mathematical or statistical equations or formulae. In this study however, the term is used in a much more flexible manner, to refer to any guiding idea or statement informed by a review of literature or some preliminary observation of the mass media in a democratising Cameroon.

In this study the main hypothesis or guiding idea is that the mass media have not succeeded to contribute in any significant and positive way to the democratic process in Cameroon through the dissemination of democratic values, and by applying democratic instruments to themselves in their practice of journalism. The study examines the relationship between the role played by the mass media and: (a) the political and legal environment within which they operate, (b) their economic and financial situation, and (c) the level of professionalism amongst media practitioners. The second hypothesis affirms that the failure by the mass media to play a significant and positive role in the democratisation of Cameroon, can be explained by: (a) the political and legal environment which is not sufficiently open, and does not provide the necessary legal framework ; (b) the poor economic and financial situation of the media and

their practitioners which limits their independence and ability to pursue professional objectives; (c) the high degree of unprofessional journalism and the disrespect for evidence by the mass media and their practitioners.

These hypotheses were operationalised or measured as follows:

(a) Political and legal environment

Here the basic assumption is that the media are a reflection of their society; and that if the political and legal frameworks or cultures of the larger society are not democratic, it is very unlikely that the media would be any different or that they would have the political and legal freedom to set their own agendas in matters of democratisation. Thus the following questions:

- What is the political environment and culture within which the mass media operate?

- Is this environment or culture democratic? Or is it conducive to the growth of a democratic culture?

- What is the legal framework within which the mass media operate?

- Is this legal framework democratic in principle and in practice?

(b) Economic and financial situation

The basic assumption in this case is that the mass media and their practitioners cannot promote democracy or a democratic culture if they lack the financial or economic independence to do so. If individuals, pressure groups, big business or government fund or subsidize the mass media, the tendency is for them to seek to influence decision-making and content in the direction of their interests, which may or may not be compatible with the democratic aspirations of the larger society that the media should serve. And so the following

questions:

- Do the media institutions have the economic or financial autonomy necessary to promote democracy and work independently?
- Do media practitioners have the job security and material comfort they need to gather, process and disseminate with independence information relevant to democracy?

(c) Professionalism

Here the basic assumption is that the media and their practitioners best serve democracy if they promote tolerance and respect for evidence. And this is best done not only by informing their audience on the virtues of democracy, but by applying democratic instruments themselves. Being professional by being objective mediators is the best way for the media to unite society around a democratic culture. Hence the following questions:

- What is the level of professionalism in the Cameroonian media?
- Are media practitioners organised and united to be able to pursue common professional interests?
- Are media practitioners honest, fair and accurate in their practice of journalism?
- Are the media objective mediators in the democratic debate?

(iii) Methodology

To answer the research questions posed above and verify our hypotheses, the study consisted of two empirical components:

- (a) A critical qualitative and quantitative analysis of official documents, regulatory provisions, newspaper articles and CRTV broadcasts, policy statements, reports, studies and other

material related to the mass media in Cameroon. The use of documentary information in research is well known, and with the necessary critical questions and reading between the lines, this can be a vital source of data.

(b) The second level of the empirical exercise consisted of interviews with and analysis of declarations by officials of the ministries of Communication, Territorial Administration, and Justice and Keeper of the Seals, all of which ministries are directly involved with regulating the media. It also consisted of interviews with journalists of the private and official media, and with newspaper vendors. This empirical exercise was aimed at understanding how the policies, laws, goals, and expectations spelt out in the documents examined at the first instance, are implemented in practice; what the media practitioners and officials in question think of the said policies, laws, goals and expectations; and what they consider to be the factors that hinder or facilitate the democratic practice of journalism in transitional Cameroon.

The report consists of five parts, of which the first gives a cursory overview of multipartyism in Cameroon, in view of understanding the political environment wherein the media operate. Part two dwells on the relationship between the official media and political pluralism in Cameroon by looking at: (i) CRTV and the democratic process; (ii) CRTV and Anglophone journalism of liberation; (iii) *Cameroon Tribune*, SOPECAM and the Democratic process; and (iv) the official media and opposition politics. In part three, the legal framework is examined under: (i) critical analysis of the press law; (ii) the law as interpreted by Government; (iii) the law as interpreted by the press; (iv) justifications for censorship by MINAT; and (v) the law and the newspaper vendor. Part four looks at professionalism in the private press by discussing: (i) the private press and the journalism of excesses; (ii) lack of professionalism and adequate organisation; (iii) the proliferation of newspapers; (iv) democracy as victim of a sectarian press; (v) journalists and the problems facing them;

and (vi) the National Forum on Communication. Part five, the general conclusion, recapitulates and recommends by looking at: (i) the role the mass media have played in the current democratic process; and (ii) how best the mass media could contribute to democratisation.

I hope that the study, in addition to satisfying a purely academic interest, has made a contribution, no matter how modest, to a better understanding of the difficulties confronting the institution of a veritable democratic culture in Cameroon. If after reading this study, Cameroonians can bring themselves to seriously re-examine the role the media should play towards the institutionalisation of participatory democracy, and seek to facilitate the media's task in this regard, the study would have achieved its purpose.

Cameroon experienced a brief period of multipartyism both before and shortly after independence. The single party instituted in 1966, reigned for twenty-five years, with only a brief change in appellation in 1985 when the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) replaced the CNU to consolidate President Biya's accession to power in November 1982. During this period, government impatience with alternatives was remarkable. The party and government monitored and incriminated marxist-leninists, UPCists (Mukong, 1985), and anyone, even the clergy¹ with sympathies the power elite did not share.

For twenty-five years Cameroonians were forced to live a system where the centre of power was identified with the centre of truth². What was wanted and got in such a system was, to paraphrase Václav Havel (Vladislav (ed), 1986:39), a conspiracy of silence, a total abdication of reason, conscience, and responsibility. Despite declarations to the contrary, Cameroonians, especially those who differed with the government, needed to "go underground or into exile or desert their families to be able to express their opinions" (CPDM, 1985:35). For the dual ideologies of national unity and national development were used to stifle initiative and stifle creativity. Its critics thus silenced, the government could argue that all was well, and that Cameroon was a veritable island of peace and quiet in an Africa of turbulence.³

1. see *Jeune Afrique Economie* N° 148, octobre 1991 for Bishop Ndongmo's personal account of his tribulations

2. see *Cameroon Tribune* N° 3080, vendredi 21 septembre 1984 for Paul Biya's "truth comes from above, rumour comes from below" speech

3. see *Cameroon Tribune*, N° 1069, Tuesday November 6, 1990, p.17

It is such thinking, that the stalwarts of the single party used to explain away the “obstinate” launching by John Fru Ndi, of the Social Democratic Front (SDF) in Bamenda on May 26, 1990. The one-party logic demanded that accusations, whether true or false, be levied against John Fru Ndi and everything SDF. Thus the allegations that John Fru Ndi owed the defunct Cameroon Bank FCFA 400 million; that certain Anglophone students at the University of Yaounde had sung the Nigerian national anthem; that 10,000 Nigerians had marched in Bamenda during the launching; and that John Fru Ndi himself had escaped to Nigeria following the death of six people at the launching of his party. Indeed, the whole initiative was presented not only as limited to Bamenda and the North West Province, but also as being “essentially of a tribal character,” in which every person who took part or sympathised with the launching were branded as “victims of a manipulation” (Ngniman, 1993:24-64), by someone (John Fru Ndi) who was low in morals and who was not credit-worthy⁴.

However, pressured from every direction, President Biya used the first extra-ordinary Congress of the CPDM (dubbed the congress of Freedom and Democracy), to urge militants to “be prepared to face possible competition,” and to be tolerant. But he also urged them to, “in all circumstances, maintain a winning spirit”.⁵

The decision to open up was not because the CPDM was lacking in democratic achievements, President Biya argued. He highlighted the contributions made by him and his party to the advancement of democracy in Cameroon. The CPDM, “born out of the call for freedom and democracy by the Cameroonian people after 20 years of an authoritarian regime,” “did not wait

⁴ *Cameroon Tribune*, May 30, 1990, p.2

⁵ *Cameroon Tribune*, July 4, 1990 N° 1033, p.13

for democracy to be kindled in the countries of Eastern Europe as a universal principle ... to realize that it is the sole medium of apprenticeship in freedom and development.” However, given that democracy is a process, Paul Biya promised to continue their “onward march towards a modern democracy,” but “*at our pace, according to our means and by taking into account our country’s specificities.*”⁶

As promised, President Biya convened parliament in November 1990 to discuss measures aimed at liberalising the country. This resulted in a series of decrees on “rights and freedoms” promulgated in December 1990.⁷ Amongst these was law N° 90/056 of December 19, 1990 authorising multipartyism. A law criticised for placing the decision to authorise the legal existence of political parties in the hands of the Minister of Territorial Administration, himself member of the CPDM, a party keen to stay in power. By playing both as umpire and contestant, the CPDM was in a position to redefine or bend the rules of the game of multiparty democracy in Cameroon (Monga, 1992:13-24). That notwithstanding, by the time of the first multiparty legislative elections in March 1992 (elections boycotted by SDF because of the electoral code which it described as “obnoxious” and as having “set in place an organised racket for rigging any elections,”⁸ despite the offer by President Biya of FCFA 500 million to parties willing to participate), the country had 68 political parties. 32 parties were officially claimed⁹ to have participated at the elections, following which four parties gained representation in the 180 seat parliament thus: the CPDM (88), l’Union Nationale pour

⁶ see *Cameroon Tribune*, N° 1033, July 4, 1990, p.13 (added emphasis)

⁷ see SOPECAM (1991) for a complete collection

⁸ see *Cameroon Post* N° 93 January 6-13 1992 and *Le Messager* (English) Vol. II N° 007 Friday February 21, 1992, p.6

⁹ see *Cameroon Tribune*, N° 5075 jeudi 20 février, 1992, p. 10

la Démocratie et le Progrès (UNDP) (68), UPC (18), and Mouvement pour la Défense de la République (MDR) (6). The CPDM proceeded to form a government with MDR. More parties were created and authorised before and after the early and highly controversial presidential elections of October 11 1992, to the point that today Cameroon has over 100 political parties.¹⁰

The multiplicity of parties, most of which have no existence outside the personality of their founders, can be explained partly by the government's interest to dissipate real democracy and opposition, and partly because in a plural society with multiple socio-cultural cleavages like Cameroon, it is difficult for any one political party, especially founded along ethnic, linguistic or religious lines, to sufficiently cater for every group's interest. The first signs of cracks in a united front of opposition parties became evident when four parties dissociated themselves from the Yaounde Plan of Action of June 15, 1991.¹¹ The results of both the March 1 1992

¹⁰ The government's white paper on *Human Rights in Cameroon*, published in November 1993, lists 70 authorised political parties (see pages 99-109), while Boyomo (1995:17) puts the figure of legalised political parties by 31 August 1994 at 103, and L'Effort Camerounais (N°32(1029) of October 7-20, 1995, p.8) lists 117 parties.

¹¹ The four parties included Louis Tobie Mbida's Parti des Démocrates Camerounais (PDC), the Parti Socialiste Camerounais (PSC) of Nseth Nseth Appolinaire-Guillaume, the Parti de l'Alliance Libérale (PAL) of Bedzigui Célestin, and Ngouo Woungly Massaga's Parti de la Solidarité du Peuple (PSP). They viewed the Yaounde Plan of Action as a call for war and violence, and claimed they were ready to dialogue with government and to respect constituted authority. Their move was interpreted as a stab on the back by the other members of the opposition, who rationalised that they had always suspected that the Beti among them were spying for their "brother" in power (see *Cameroon Post* N° 75 Thursday June 20-27 1991, p.1; and *Cameroon Post* N° 71 Monday May 27-30, 1991, p.1).

parliamentary elections¹² and the October 11 1992 presidential elections¹³ show that Cameroonians vote along ethnic and regional lines.

Today Cameroonians have multipartyism, but the one-party logic persists. Those who do not share the same political platform with “us,” cannot be right; they must be dishonest, traitorous, unpatriotic. How can they afford not to see things like we do? In this way, after the presidential elections of October 1992 the CPDM, in order to consolidate what Hillebrand (1993) in reference to Gabon has termed “pseudo-democracy” or “recycled” monolithism, or what Ngniman (1993) has termed “parcelled democracy”¹⁴, sought and succeeded in having every party in parliament represented in its government, thus bringing about the end of a real parliamentary opposition. One of the consequences is that in a multiparty Cameroon with a multiparty assembly, the actual opposition is found outside parliament.

The radical opposition has not proved itself to be above the one-party logic. During the period of “ghost towns”¹⁵,

¹² see *Jeune Afrique* N° 154, avril 1992; Ngniman, 1993:11-17

¹³ see *Le Messager* N° 282 du 26 octobre 1992; *Cameroon Tribune* N° 5247 mardi 27 octobre 1992, p.10-11; and Onana (1994:143-157)

¹⁴ According to the official, though doubted, results of the October 11, 1992 presidential elections, the five opposition candidates put together scored 60.024% of the total number of votes cast, while President Biya scored 39.976%. What this means in effect is that 60.024% of the electorate voted in favour of a change of president.

¹⁵ This was the period between April 1991 and January 1992, when the radical opposition issued calls, ultimatums, tracts, etc., asking the public to immobilise economic activity by staying indoors, blocking streets, refusing to pay taxes and bills, and boycotting the markets and offices. The intention being to force Paul Biya and his government to accept to hold a “sovereign national conference”. These protests were to be intensified after President Biya, in what many observers have termed, his firmest and most provocative speech ever, declared on June 27 1991, that “the national conference is pointless in Cameroon,” and that he would maintain order at

members of the public were forced to buy opposition party cards; and sometimes at very exorbitant prices. Innocent persons were also forced to buy “yellow,” “red” and “green” cards¹⁶ purportedly issued by “the people of Cameroon” against the enemies of democracy. Prominent members of the ruling CPDM were coerced to resign and join the opposition, and those who failed to were termed unpatriotic and traitorous, and in certain cases, made to suffer vandalism and intimidation. Such coercion was bound to make those in search of real democracy wonder if the opposition simply wanted to substitute one form of intolerance with another. As Zacharie Ngniman, victim of such intolerance, has observed, “I could hardly digest their propensity to want to force me to share their way of seeing things” (Ngniman, 1993:62).

The “ghost town” was decreed by the opposition without prior education of the public and without its foreseeable effects provided for. A consequence of this was that some supporters of opposition parties forced even those who disagreed with them to conform. Road blocks were erected, tyres burnt, shops looted, and damage done to vehicles and buildings of public and private ownership (Ngniman, 1993:84-142). It was an exercise in intimidation and violence, pillars of the very

all cost. For more on the ghost town phenomenon, see Célestin Monga’s *La Recomposition du Marche Politique au Cameroun* (1991-1992).

¹⁶ In *Jeune Afrique Economie* (N° 144, juin 1991, p.145) are examples of a yellow card issued to Sadou Hayatou, prime minister at the time, and a red card, asking President Paul Biya to quit. These cards were sold to members of the public, who had to buy one to show that they were not allies of dictatorship. The cost, according to Ngniman (1993:98-99), ranged from FCFA 50 to FCFA 10,000, depending on the humour of the vendor, the attitude of the customer, or the degree of luxury of the latter’s car, since these cards were intended to serve as a sort of windscreen licence, or a *laissez-passer*.

dictatorship the opposition claimed they wanted to put an end to. Was one not given the impression that one form of intolerance was seeking to substitute another?

Writing about current attempts at democratisation in Africa, Meyer observes that the deep aspiration of African peoples to radical change has been thwarted not only by the resistance of leaders determined to stay in power, but also by the fact that most of those who have founded opposition parties are simply leaders of the old parties with new slogans. Thus his conclusion that the major obstacle to real democracy in Africa “c’est la subsistance de structures antidémocratiques qu’il faut abolir” (Meyer, 1994:19).

Naturally, the CPDM government took advantage of the opposition’s acts of intolerance and accused it of violence, intimidation, burning and looting.¹⁷ In his June 27, 1991 speech to parliament, Paul Biya mocked at the opposition’s failure to show democratic behaviour; and speaking to his supporters on the eve of the October 1992 presidential elections, he accused the opposition of lacking real programmes of action and of simply wanting to gain power by changing the authors of change. The need to stay in power forbade the government from looking deeper than necessary. It could be argued, as Boh Herbert has done, that “vandalism, provoked by the absence of dialogue and by brutal military repression, is the people’s only way of speaking loud enough to be heard above the noise generated by the firing of tear gas and gun shots. It is a desperate message from millions of peace-loving countrymen enslaved by abject poverty.”¹⁸

The government not only blamed the opposition for all the unrest, it took no immediate political action to stop it. This

¹⁷ see CPDM, 1991; Ngniman, 1993:103-105; *Cameroon Tribune* (N° 5246, lundi 26 octobre 1992; N° 5249, jeudi 29 octobre 1992)

¹⁸ *Le Messenger* N° 030 Saturday August 3, 1991, p.14

brought from the opposition accusations of provocation and intransigence (Ngniman, 1993:103-142; Gobata, 1993:60-62), and pointed to a determination by the CPDM to stay in power at all cost.¹⁹ The government failed to attend to calls for dialogue,²⁰ thus leaving the disaffected with little else than the option to seek to make Cameroon ungovernable to President Biya, whom some saw as a “curse,” as “bad-luck”²¹. There was

¹⁹ Following the crippling effect of the “ghost town” phenomenon on the economy, the government started a campaign (April 9, 1992) on “the restoration of state authority,” without seeking, objectively, to identify and address what had led to the loss of authority. As *Le Messager* (N° 267 du 18 juin, 1992, p.13) remarked, contrary to official propaganda, state authority is not imposed by force but by the moral probity of those who govern. “When the leaders are morally upright, the people are confident in them and their instructions are followed. On the contrary, when at the helm of state are lies, corruption, confusion, moral deprivation, reckless plunder of the commonwealth and dishonesty of all sort, state authority comes crashing to the ground,” and no amount of display of arms and brutality would reinstate it.

The reasons given by George Achu Mofor for his resignation as Governor for the East Province, if anything to go by, prove the assertion that the CPDM government was ready to use any dishonest means to stay in power (see *L'Expression* N° 012 30 octobre 1992 P.8).

²⁰ As Bole Butake put it in his open letter “I Refuse to be Lapiroed” -- a reaction distancing himself from the CPDM after being appointed without consultation as member of the party’s campaign delegation to Meme Division for the parliamentary elections of March 1992, even though he was not a militant of the CPDM (see *Cameroon Post* N° 98, 1992. p.2), “The problem with the ruling party is its inability to engage even its own militants in dialogue which I consider to be the most elementary of things in any society that is politically healthy. The gurus of our society are living with the illusion that money is the prime mover, not God.” The term “Lapiroed” was coined from the name Lapiro de Mbanga (derived from Lambo Pierre Roger), a once very popular anti-establishment musician who fell into disgrace amongst his fans and the opposition public when he was alleged to have been bought over with a bribe of CFA 23 million by the Biya government.

²¹ In one of the opposition tracts at the time, Paul Biya was termed “L’incarnation de la malédiction au Cameroun,” whose ten years in power

even little evidence of dialogue between the President and members of his government.²² The President was repeatedly accused of maintaining a “stunning” silence over “burning” issues which it was his duty as head of state to resolve.²³

The one-party logic has prevented Cameroonian multipartyism from addressing the real issue: how best to bring about meaningful participatory democracy. The momentum and enthusiasm for change generated with the rebirth of multipartyism petered out shortly after the 1992 presidential elections, when the public learnt that democracy is not necessarily having as president the person the majority wants.²⁴

had brought nothing but bad-luck and torture to Cameroonian, and to his close collaborators. The tract enumerated a catalogue of natural disasters, economic failures, political violence and intrigue, and social problems which it all blamed on Biya. Finally, it called on Cameroonians to distance themselves from “this calamity and bad-luck” by voting against him. (For a reproduction and update of much of the contents of the said tract, see Wang Sonne’s article in *Le Messager* N° 347 du 31 janvier 1994, p.12).

²² Interviewed on the BBC Africa Service by Veronique Edwards on November 6, 1993, Garga Haman Adj, former minister of the Public Service and State Control, accused Paul Biya of being a most unavailable president to members of his cabinet: “I’m sure Mr Biya can meet some of his former ministers and be unable to recognise them, because he never used to meet or grant them audience. In all my life as minister under Biya, I met him three times. [...] My nature is work, work, work. And I can’t do this with a man like Biya. I sent him three reform projects, and never heard anything from him.[...]”

²³ see for example Ngoh Nkwain in *Cameroon Post* N° 42 Thursday September 13-20, 1990, p.4); and the Catholic Bishops’ episcopal letter of May 17, 1990, criticising the president’s silence on important issues.

²⁴ One of the consequences was post-election violence. (For a government account, see *Cameroon Tribune* N° 5246, lundi 26 and N° 5249, jeudi 29 octobre 1992, and also see the Ministry of Communication’s white paper on *Human Rights in Cameroon*, published November 1993. For a detailed, alternative account, see Boh Herbert’s *Cameroon: State of Human Rights Violations Following October 11 Presidential Elections*, made public November 10, 1992. For a non-Cameroonian view, read (pp.31-40) the US Department of State *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1992*

Thus the bulk of Cameroonians, despite multipartyism, continue to be compelled to abide by decisions taken without their consent or participation. They continue to have little impact even on their most pressing problems and interests, as the political, economic and social changes that they yearn for are being planned, executed or thwarted according to the one-best-way logic of the one-party era. It is a case of recycled monolithism, of pseudo or parcelled democracy, of democracy by remote control.

This chapter examines the part the official media – CRTC and *Cameroon Tribune* – have played in the on-going democratic process. It seeks to answer the question whether these institutions have adequately informed the Cameroonian public on democratic values and have shown proof of using democratic instruments themselves in their practice of journalism.

(i) CRTC and the Democratic Process

Until the passing of the December 1990 Freedom of Mass Communication law, the private press was most rigidly controlled (Nji, 1985; Nyamnjoh, 1990). Foreign broadcasts or foreign publications on Cameroon were not regular, only coming when something major had happened. This meant that most of the time, the literate few were confined to the government-controlled *Cameroon Tribune*, radio and television, while the illiterate masses were left with rumour and informal communication as their most legitimate source of information of any kind. The absence or scarcity of objective information through the conventional channels of mass communication often pushed the public to invent that information by way of rumour. And rumour has become so prominent that Cameroonians have a rich variety of names for it: one hears of “radio trottoir,” “radio one-battery,” “radio kongosa,” “Radio 33” and “FM Malabo,” among others (cf. Nyamnjoh, 1994).

The negative feeling towards CRTC and *Cameroon Tribune* took a turn for the worse following the “Yondo Black Affair” in March 1990 and the launching of the SDF in

Bamenda in May 1990. According to *Le Messager*²⁵, on March 27, 1990 Lawyer B.W. Muna addressed the Cameroon Bar Association (CBA) in Douala on the eve of the trial of the former CBA president lawyer Yondo Black and nine others, accused of “holding clandestine meetings in view of producing and disseminating tracts hostile to the regime, insulting to the President of the Republic, and inciting to revolt”.²⁶ The official media were silent on the speech, while others saw it as a milestone in the struggle against human right abuses in Cameroon. The blackout gave rise to allegations of “a conscience of guilt,” a contention given added credibility when the same official media, silent on the original address, found it newsworthy to air dissenting reactions against lawyer Muna and what his address stood for. CRTV broadcast statements by lawyers Epassy Antione, Mbian Emmanuel and Ngon A Bidias in which the three accused lawyer Muna of using his position as president of the CBA to promote his political ambitions. This example, and the one that follows are typical of CRTV throughout the period of struggle for multiparty democracy in Cameroon (see Ngniman, 1993).

After the Yondo Black Affair and prior to the launching of the SDF, the CRTV radio English language programme “Cameroon Calling” of Sunday May 6 1990, devoted entirely to multipartyism and democracy, resulted in arrests and detention as well as in administrative sanctions against its crew (for more see Boh & Ntemfac, 1991; Ngniman, 1993:48; Nyamnjoh, 1993:98). Following the launching of the SDF during which six people were shot dead by security forces, the official media decided to conceal the truth. As Zacharie Ngniman explains, he

25. English, N° 001 Tuesday July 10, 1990, 1&12

26. For more on the trial, see Paddy Mbawa’s “blow-by-blow account” in *Cameroon Post* N° 35 May 7-14, 1990)

received a communiqué from “the hierarchy” asking him to report that the six had been trampled to death. The TV used stock pictures in place of what actually took place, and accusations to which we have already referred in detail in our discussion of multipartyism, were made against John Fru Ndi and Anglophone students at Yaounde University.²⁷ These allegations, Ngniman was later to confess, were intended by government to misinform and mislead the Cameroonian public (Ngniman, 1993:24-64).²⁸ Anglophone Cameroonians were termed “Biafrans”²⁹, referred to as “l’ennemi dans la maison,”

²⁷ John Fru Ndi, dissatisfied with the way *Cameroon Tribune*, in particular, had reported and commented on the events surrounding the unauthorized launching of his party, was later to file a libel suit against the paper, SOPECAM and three others, and to claim FCFA 400 million (see *Cameroon Post* N°38 Tuesday July 31-August 7, 1990, p.1; N° 52 Monday December 3-10, 1990; N° 58 Wednesday February 13-20, 1991, p.1; N° 66 Thursday, April 18-25, 1991, p.3; N° 0183, Wednesday September 29 - October 6, 1993, p.17); and *Cameroon Tribune*, N° 1080, Friday December 14, 1990, P.2, for details on the suit and how the case developed).

²⁸ Ngniman’s confession is corroborated by his colleague, Antoine-Marie Ngono, who, questioned on the issue during a Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung seminar on the “Dynamics of the Newsroom” (29-30/09/94), said that the Minister of Information and Culture at the time, Henri Bandolo, had personally brought to Zacharie Ngniman an undated, unsigned communiqué on an ordinary paper, to read that Nigerians were involved with the marching to launch the SDF. The Minister later denied he ever gave Ngniman the communiqué. Antoine-Marie Ngono (30/09/94) claimed the idea of the communiqué was to show that those involved with the SDF launching were acting under foreign (Nigerian) manipulation. This provoked a visit to the Ministry of External Affairs by the Nigerian Ambassador, where he was told that the communiqué in question was a simple tract. The foreign Minister brandished the unsigned, undated “communiqué” on an ordinary paper to the Ambassador, and was categorical that the journalists who had broadcast it had simply behaved irresponsibly.

²⁹ Perhaps not only because they are neighbours and share a common colonial heritage with the Igbos of Nigeria, but also because (reminiscent of the Biafran war) of their thirst for freedom and autonomy

accused of ingratitude and bad faith to President Biya who had done so much for their region, and asked by then Minister of Territorial Administration, Ibrahim Mbombo Njoya, “to go elsewhere” if they were dissatisfied with the Cameroon they had (Ngniman, 1993:51).

Taken unawares by the winds of change and by the clamour for freedom and democracy, the official media continued in the same disinformation vein. Their struggles to legitimate or justify government action against a background of relentless attacks from the private press and opposition parties, only earned them further public disaffection³⁰. Instead of adapting in time to accommodate alternative voices, CRTV management opted to stay with the status quo. The official media remained consistent in their pro-government perspective, despite calls for change from the opposition, the private press and members of the public.³¹ Some members of

from the authorities in Yaounde.

³⁰ Talking about disaffection, Napoleon Viban of CRTV (see “Cameroon Calling,” 07/11/93) admits that it is hard to reconcile today’s disillusionment in Cameroonians, “with the nationwide euphoria that greeted President Biya’s accession to power in November 1982. His attractive blueprint held a lot of promise for the restricted political landscape, and he started off with great charisma as it dawned on Cameroonians that a change to a new order was in the horizon. Eleven years later, what cuts across the Cameroonian society today is social stress. The spectre is one of broken dreams.”

³¹ see *Cameroon Post* N° 59, Wednesday, February 27, 1991, p.2.

An opinion poll dubbed “Concours de Griots,” which was aimed at establishing the degree of unpopularity of official media journalists, was conducted by *Galaxie* among its readers (March 12, 1991). Charles Ndongo (CRTV) came up first with 19.5 on 20, and Zacharie Ngniman (CRTV) was second with 14 points. Sally Messio (CRTV) and Abui Mama Eloundo (Cameroon Tribune) ran neck-to-neck 13 points each, with Jean Atangana (CRTV) closely following.

CRTV was particularly accused of using its programme “Tout sur Tout” (presented by Charles Ndongo) to absolve directors and ex-directors of parastatals accused of embezzlement, instead of allowing the law courts

the disaffected public corrupted 'CRTV' to mean 'Centre de Re-établissement Total des Voleurs' or 'Confused Radio Television', and journalists of non-Beti origin who failed to take a critical distance from government and the CPDM were given Beti names, while the Beti journalists were simply referred to as "griots" (praise-singers). A unit was created in CRTV to monitor anti-government reports in the private media (Nyamnjoh, 1993)³², and administrative sanctions against critical broadcasters and against 'offensive' investigative journalism by the radio programme "Cameroon Calling"³³, were reinforced.

The reluctance of CRTV to adapt to the changing context provoked an open letter from two of its senior journalists - Zacharie Ngniman and Antione-Marie Ngono, who complained of their incapacity to perform their journalistic functions freely and of CRTV's lack of credibility.³⁴ Its failure

to determine their guilt (see *Cameroon Post* (N° 45 Thursday October 11-18, 1990; N° 38 Tuesday July 31 - August 7, 1990, p.5; N° 43, Monday September 24-30, 1990, p.1; N° 79 Monday August 12-19, 1991, p.14.)

³² According to *Le Messager* (N° 017 Tuesday February 5, 1991, p.1), this special task force was expected to "address a weekly report to the headquarters ... pertaining to all attacks by the private Press against the government, the CPDM party, national institutions, the functioning and management of state corporations as well as their bosses or against the CRTV." The reports had to suggest methods of replying by CRTV presented in the form of articles in *Cameroon Tribune* and/or radio and TV features extolling the actions of government in the domain criticised (see also *Challenge Hebdo* N° 0018 du 29 janvier au 06 février 1991, p.1, for more on Mendo Ze's "Cellule de Suivi des Médias").

³³ see "Anglophone liberation journalism" below

³⁴ Some however believe that this open letter, coming after the two journalists had told untruths in connection with the launching of the SDF, did not absolve the journalists of their professional irresponsibilities. As Dr J.B. Fonyam argued (see *Cameroon Post* N° 47 Thursday October 25-November 1, 1990, p.12), having lied to the public through CRTV, and having realised that they had lied, "why did they not use the very medium to

to feel the pulse and to adapt accordingly was seen by some as a serious disservice to the Cameroonian public and a source of malice for most of its journalists (Ngniman, 1993:24-28). The institution made the broadcasters more of public relations officials than objective professional journalists. This open letter, the first of its kind in CRTV, was reproduced, dramatised, and capitalised upon by the private press, in particular by *La D tente*, *Le Messenger*, and *Le Combattant*. It would also be the source of worry for the two journalists, whom the government could no longer trust mouthpieces (Ngniman, 1993:48-64). At the CPDM party congress in June 1990, Antoine-Marie Ngono³⁵ was denied access to the congress hall by a military captain who told him: “vous n’ tes pas trop sur”. For daring to complain, the journalists had lost credibility in the eyes of the authorities. Hence Antoine-Marie Ngono’s conviction that “Au Cameroun on n’aime pas que les journalistes anticipent dans la presse publique.”

To guarantee that things are done its way, government appoints to positions of responsibility not necessarily those with merit and professional experience, but those who are politically in tune with the authorities (Ntemfac, 1993). As Antoine-Marie Ngono observes, “A la CRTV c’est la r gle de l’administration qui joue. La fonction appartient   l’ tat qui peut faire d’un journaliste n’importe quoi. Ce n’est pas le m rite professionnelle qui fait avancer, mais des consid rations politico-administratives.  a fait que les jeunes sans l’exp rience

apologise and state the truth or was the radio accessible to them only in fomenting the lies? Like in defamation, the damage had been done and in failing to gainsay the lies to the deserving public in a categorical manner, they remain professional debtors to the Cameroonian nation today and in the morrow for their aggressive editorials on issues they had failed to verify.”

professionnelle nécessaire puissent devenir des rédacteurs en chef, etc.” This practice has, according to Bright Nsame³⁶ given rise to an “over-zealous quest for positions of responsibility and other favours,” in some CRTV journalists who may “go to devilish ends and tell blatant intoxicating lies in favour of the regime in place”.³⁷ There is little communication between management and journalists, except by way of service notes, queries and sanctions (cf. Tabi, 1994:84-102). What the government wants and succeeds in having most of the time, are journalists “confined to the role of praise-singers, churning out shallow press statements that make headline news while corruption, incompetence, economic mismanagement and human rights abuses go unchecked”³⁸. The strong tendency, Blaise Tsangue affirms³⁹, is for CRTV journalists “à s’enfermer dans le rôle d’avocats du gouvernement ou du régime.”

At times the struggle is not only between journalists, as it is

³⁶ *Cameroon Post*, N° 0186 October 20 - 27 1993, p.16

³⁷ The most zealous supporters of the regime, it has been observed, are journalists of Beti origin (see *Cameroon Post* N° 0208, March 9-16 1994, p.10 for the case of Alain Belibi and Jean-Marie Nka’a). Not only positions but coverage is assigned along ethnic lines (Ntemfac, 1993), especially during periods of tension and political controversy. A telling example was provided by *Challenge Hebdo* (N° 004 du mars 9, 1992, p.13), which monitored the election day broadcast in CRTV on the legislative elections of March 1, 1992. All journalists in this example were, like President Biya, of the Beti ethnic group:

“Dans ce studio, je suis Jean ATANGANA, j’ai à mes côtés Antoine Marie NGONO, nous avons déployé toute une grande équipe à cette occasion, nous allons prendre à bord de la voiture émetrice Pascal MEBE ABAH, à Maroua Hugues François ONANA; à Garoua Alain BELIBI; à Ngaoundéré Pierre Le Bon ELANGA; à Ebolowa Roger BETALA; à Buéa J.P. EFOUBA ONANA; à Bafoussam Alphonse ATSAMA; à Bamenda Severe AMOUGOU, etc...”

³⁸ *Le Messenger* N° 024 Special Edition, Thursday, April 25, 1991, p.7

³⁹ *Le Messenger* N° 260 du 30 avril, 1992

not uncommon to find nonjournalists presenting radio and television programmes and even reading news. This is what we learn from Albert Mbida, an insider, in a reply on the FM 94 news programme “Tintamarre,” on February 14, 1993, to Florence Njilie, a typist with CRTV, whom he claimed called him “colleague” and accused him of taking bribe from the Minister of Commerce and Industry, Patrice Mandeng Ambassa:

“CRTV is this rare station, about the only one in the world, whose waves and screens are open to people who know nothing about the business. You know as well as I do that not less than three typists present radio and TV programmes, that script writers, producers, speakerines, copyright clerks and translators present radio and television programmes and even read news. And I almost forgot there are even archives and make-up girls and disc-jockeys and guitar boys who present programmes at CRTV.

If CRTV were a hospital it would be said that at the CRTV hospital, paediatricians, dentists, gynaecologists, dermatologists, anaesthetists, nurses, ward-servants, waiters etc., carry out delicate surgery. With people like you in such a hospital, Miss Njilie, it will not be surprising that so many people operated upon die.

Miss Njilie you are only a typist. Tell me exactly how you managed to go on the air. Were you led by professional motives or something more sinister? You had the nerves to sit on a chair which does not belong to you. You merit only a stool. Your gaffe provides an opportunity to rid the radio (and television) of all parasites who, like you, make it difficult to justify the audio-visual tax paid by Cameroonians to CRTV.

The crux of this sorry affair is that those who usurp the

place of Journalists lack the vocal and verbal abilities to be Journalists. They read like primary school children. They pronounce like toothless persons, and as for their accent, any villager would do better” (Albert Mbida, translated by *Cameroon Post* N° 150 February 23, 1993, p.7)

Despite eventual and increasing claims of having opened up, CRTV remains largely an instrument of selective communication⁴⁰; filtering through mostly what it sees as good and safe for the government. The institution has continued to disseminate the views and values of government and its allies to the detriment of all those who think and see differently. The general idea has been to inhibit the growth of opposed views or to misrepresent and delegitimize them. CRTV has consistently worked to exclude alternative voices, while consolidating the position of government and its supporters. It has allowed

⁴⁰ When CRTV does not simply decide to stay mute, its coverage of certain national issues is questionable and consistently in favour of the government (cf Eonè, 1994:12-14). The CRTV has always interpreted events as if the government is ever right, whether one takes the shootings in Bamenda during the launching of the SDF or the anti-multiparty rallies thereafter; the Episcopal letter of May 17, 1990 by Cameroonian Bishops or the repeated attempts by the government to divide the Bar Council through controversial reforms; the Monga/Njawe trials in January 1991 or the Mongo Beti trip to Cameroon in March 1991; the “ghost town” phenomenon; the demonstrations at the University of Yaounde in April (1-8) 1991 or the Yaounde Plan of Action by the opposition parties on June 27, 1991; the grounding in the US in May 1992 of a Cameroonian presidential plane; the Messi-Messi Affair or the Petit Jean Affair; the “Message to all Christians” (Sunday November 29, 1992) and declarations over RFI on December 6, 1992 by Archbishop Paul Verdzev concerning the state of emergency in Bamenda; the resignation of George Achu Mofor as Governor for the East Province; the 1992 presidential elections and their violent aftermath; John Fru Ndi’s visit to the US in 1993; the confrontation between John Fru Ndi and the Riot Police in Yaounde on Wednesday November 3, 1993; the AAC or the Cameroon GCE crisis.

access largely to those least likely to criticise the prevailing distribution of power, while doing everything to exclude the real opposition. Thus, for instance, following the presidential elections when a state of emergency was declared in Bamenda and the SDF leader placed under house arrest, various allegations were made by CRTV against John Fru Ndi, yet not a single chance was given him to defend himself or to express his own views.⁴¹ The Minister of Information and Culture, Prof. Augustin Kontchou Kuoumegni, preferred to continue with his monologues on CRTV and *Cameroon Tribune*,⁴² rather

⁴¹ Without access to radio and television, John Fru Ndi had to content himself with the private press and foreign media to disseminate his reaction to the supreme court decision to declare Paul Biya winner of the elections. His self-proclamation as president-elect in Bamenda on October 21, 1992 (see *L'Expression* N° 011 du 22 au 26 octobre, 1992, p.3), would certainly have had a greater effect had it been carried on CRTV, which the government used to dismiss the self-proclamation as “anti-démocratique, grave, anti-nationale, indigne, irresponsable,” and to warn that the government “prendra toutes les mesures qu’impose cette situation” (see also, *Cameroon Tribune* N° 5242 jeudi 22 octobre, 1992). Also of greater effect would have been the communique issued two days after the state of emergency was decreed and he, John Fru Ndi, placed under house arrest (see *Cameroon Post*, N° 132, October 30 - November 4, 1992, p.5), calling on all Cameroonians in favour of change “not to hesitate, not to relent their efforts but to scrupulously adhere to the plan of action ... of the UNION FOR CHANGE”.

⁴² During one of his press briefings, the minister claimed that “old women were intimidated in Ebolowa ... with the story that Ni Fru Ndi was an emissary from God and that anybody who did not vote for the candidate with the clenched fist would be singled out and meted divine retribution” (see Ngoh Nkwain in *Cameroon Today* N° 13 November 17, 1992, p.10). At another press briefing, the minister insisted that the SDF had a four point diabolical plan “pour remettre la paix en cause au Cameroun.” (see *Cameroon Tribune* N° 5247 mardi 27 octobre 1992 p. 6; and *L'Expression* N° 012, 30 octobre 1992, P. 7). In neither occasion was John Fru Ndi given the opportunity to react to the allegations on CRTV.

According to Antoine-Marie Ngono (interviewed 30/9/94), during the October 1992 presidential elections, the minister personally

than take up a challenge by the SDF campaign manager, Bernard Muna:

“... to a live debate on the television and radio which you so effectively control and manipulate. You bring all your proof and I shall bring mine. Let us convince the Cameroonian people who the liars, the cheats and the frauds are in this ongoing democratic process. I call the entire Cameroonian people to bear witness, if you refuse this live debate, to the fact that all you have done so far is to lie to them and manipulate the media, to deceive the people and that the government which you claim to represent has never been honest nor fair to the people and that this whole Electoral Procedure has been an exercise aimed at maintaining yourselves in power to serve interests other than that of the Cameroonian people.

Mr Minister, I await your reply with impatience”
(Bernard Muna, *communiqué* of 20th October 1992).

In fact, after the controversial presidential elections, the Minister of State for Communication repeatedly featured on CRTV and in *Cameroon Tribune* “to set the records straight” or to “tell the truth,” as the government was accused both nationally and internationally for rigging the elections and on its human rights record. On one such occasion (December 8, 1992), he refuted claims made by the Archbishop of Bamenda, Monsignor Paul Verdzekov in an interview with RFI on December 6 that 400 people were being held under inhuman

supervised all political communication at CRTV. The minister, he said, protects access to CRTV jealously; selecting who gets exposure and who does not. Even fellow ministers need authorisation from him to feature on TV.

conditions in Bamenda. The minister contested the figure, described the Bishop's statement as "unfounded and irresponsible" and condemned the Bishop's "surprising silence on the atrocities committed in Bamenda following the proclamation of the Presidential election results." If by emphasising that relations between the state and the Catholic Church remained good, the minister hoped to isolate Archbishop Verdzekov for criticism even by other bishops, he was mistaken. During its annual meeting at the John XXIII Centre Mvolyé - Yaounde on December 11, 1992, the Standing Committee of the Bishops of Cameroon reacted to the minister's press release as published in *Cameroon Tribune*⁴³ with a declaration which referred to the accusations against the archbishop as lies.⁴⁴

The final report by the American National Democratic Institute (NDI), one of the international observers of the October 1992 presidential elections, contained a section on media access and news coverage of the campaigns. As an outsider view, the NDI report was quite critical of CRTV election coverage of opposition parties. The following is an excerpt of the report on the media⁴⁵:

"On September 24, the Minister of communications issued an order governing political party access to the government-controlled media in addition to rules concerning producing, scheduling and broadcasting campaign programs. From September 26 through October 10, each candidate was allocated a share of 120 minutes of daily air time on the radio, between 8.30 pm and 10.30 pm. On CRTV [sic], the candidates divided a daily total of 60 minutes of air time, from 9 pm to 10

⁴³ N° 5277, Wednesday, December 9, 1992

⁴⁴ see the *Sunday News Letter* (N° 315, 20th December 1992) of Christ the King Parish Ntambeng, Mankon

⁴⁵ see *Cameroon Post* N° 161 May 3, 1993, for more excerpts

pm. The time was divided evenly among candidates, based on the number of candidates in the race on a given day. By campaign's end, the six candidates were each allowed nine minutes air time on state television's *Expression Directe* programme. All candidates took advantage of this time to present videotaped campaign material.

This distribution of air time was not without problems. The opposition complained that the broadcast of *Expression Directe* frequently appeared only late in the evening; the program rarely appeared during the originally scheduled 9 pm to 10 pm. time slot. According to the opposition, the late broadcasts and correspondingly diminished audience reduced the program's effectiveness as a vehicle for communicating different points of view.

On October 2, CRTV denied air time for a videotaped segment prepared for *Expression Directe* by the campaign of candidate Jean-Jacques Ekindi. Authorities stated that they rejected the Ekindi segment because it contained "vociferous attacks" against the CPDM and "insulting and defamatory words against Paul Biya." They maintained that their action was consistent with the rules governing party access to state media. After review, though, the National Communication Board overruled the CRTV decision, and Ekindi's tape was shown on October 7. Nevertheless, Ekindi's broadcasts for October 9 and 10 were banned without notice or explanation. The opposition cited the Ekindi incident as evidence that the government was not committed to the principal of equal access to the state-controlled broadcast media.

As part of its evaluation of television news coverage, NDI timed the amount of coverage accorded to candidates from different political parties on October 7. On that day, the government received 142 minutes of news coverage as opposed to 12 minutes for the entire opposition. Similarly, U.S.

embassy personnel documented that, for the first week of the campaign, September 26 to October 3, the ruling party received 346 minutes of coverage. During the same period, all opposition parties combined received coverage totalling 124.5 minutes” (National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, 1993:31-32).

NDI’s report was dismissed in its interim version by the Minister of Communication, who described it at a CRTV press conference as “an intellectual scandal, illegal, unfounded and not being objective”; and insisted that “Cameroon has nothing to learn from anybody as far as democracy is concerned” (Ministry of Communication, 1993:256-271).

The image of CRTV as a pro-government selective communicator is recognised by most CRTV journalists and even justified by some. In the “Cameroon Calling” of 21/02/93, CRTV’s coverage of national issues was examined in the light of a multiparty Cameroon. Abongwa Tantoh noted that instead of seeking to represent or reflect all shades of national opinion, CRTV, although funded through an audio-visual tax, contented itself with “half truths and distorted facts”. On his part, Julius Wamey argued that CRTV journalism was mainly survival journalism in that the journalists sought through “bending the truth, distorting it or simply telling a lie” to protect their “gari” or to increase it. “To varying degrees, many of us in the public media can be accused of being survival journalists, if not by commission, at least by omission.”

Peter Essoka observed that as journalists, they in CRTV continue to act as if they were still in the era of monolithism. “We sing alleluias and clap for our bread,” rather than act as “veritable critics to help government in its construction engagements.” He remarked that “there is extensive use of governmental views and overuse of stories of intention,” but

“little news of the opposite opinion”. The consequence being that “our action is even more dangerous to government as we have lost credibility as information disseminators.” Nyoh Moses shared this view, arguing that CRTV “has selectively opened up to ideas that favour government, though once in a while some ideas unpalatable to government stray in.” To him it was clear that within CRTV “political opinion overrides professional competence,” the consequence being “the rampant spread of mediocrity and arrogance”.

Luke Ananga, editor-in-chief, TV news and CRTV deputy director for information, tried to justify why CRTV was serving and should indeed continue to serve as government mouthpiece, popular disenchantment notwithstanding. He argued that “CRTV is an instrument of work which is given to an elected government to use to inform the people of this country.” He argues that at:

“CRTV the editorial policy which was drawn up in a one party system hasn’t changed, and therefore the vast majority of CRTV journalists, especially those who belong to hierarchy, still work very closely within that old fashion editorial policy. You also have to understand that the constitution of this country, even though we are in a multiparty setting, hasn’t changed. It is still the single-party constitution which concentrates entirely powers in one hand. And so that makes the journalist’s job, especially the journalists who work for the public media, extremely difficult.”

To conclude this section on CRTV and the democratic process, it is important to note that CRTV is seen as a government mouthpiece not only by the audience, the opposition parties and the private press, but also by CRTV

journalists themselves, some of whom are in key positions of responsibility within the institution. But recognising the fact has not necessarily led to a conscious, concerted effort on the part of CRTV journalists to distance themselves from such subsidiary journalism. As a mouthpiece for government, CRTV has played an essentially public relations role, rather than the role of neutral mediator in the democratic process.

(ii) CRTV and Anglophone Journalism of Liberation

If CRTV as an institution has preferred to maintain its traditional role as government's public relations institution, some of its journalists, the Anglophones mainly, have questioned their role as government's PR journalists, even if only to be guilty, in turn, of PR journalism in favour of the opposition and/or the Anglophone cause. For this reason, and also because of the important contribution made by Anglophones to the current democratic process, the status of Anglophone journalism in CRTV was considered worthy of investigation.

The Anglophone journalists in the official media have in general, tended to distance themselves from the sort of pro-establishment journalism defined by government and largely taken for granted by their Francophone colleagues. The history of turbulence in the official media is principally the history of government's attempt to streamline the Anglophone journalists. The launching of the SDF in May 1990 led to much witch-hunting against the Anglophone journalists in CRTV, whom management identified with the new ("illegal") party. The witch-hunt was quite understandable, for while Zacharie Ngniman, Antione-Marie Ngono and other Francophone journalists presented the unsigned and undated communiqué from Minister Henri Bandolo as if this were verified

information, Julius Wamey, on his part, insisted that his broadcast was the government's version of events in Bamenda.⁴⁶ Relations between CRTV authorities and critical Anglophone journalists have only grown worse following the institutionalisation of multipartyism. The private press has talked of an “anti-Anglophone campaign” mounted by government and CRTV management. There is much evidence to substantiate this allegation.

*Cameroon Post*⁴⁷ reports on a meeting the Minister of Information and Culture held, the first week of June 1991, with CRTV journalists, during which the minister “implicitly accused English language programmes of being sympathetic to the opposition. Specifically cited were Luncheon Date – later on modified drastically by order of the minister, News Focus, the 7.30 pm. news and Cameroon calling from which Anembom Munjo, Wain Paul Ngam, Asonglefac Nkemleke and Julius Wamey were subsequently suspended.” The minister also attacked TV news editor-in-chief Eric Chinje “for reporting the resignation of CPDM Wouri Section President

^{46.} Until CRTV management transferred critical Anglophone journalists away from the newsroom or sanctioned them more and more for not following “handed-down” instructions on what to report and how, CRTV newscasts in English were more appreciated even by Francophones. Following a survey of its readers, *Challenge Hebdo* (N° 052 du 18 au 26 décembre 1991, p.7-10) reported, inter alia, that:

Alors que le journal en anglais est cité parmi les 6 meilleures émissions de la CRTV, son homologue en français est l'émission la moins appréciée des Camerounais lecteurs de Challenge Hebdo. Cette place ne saurait surprendre car il a été prouvé que la ligne éditoriale de la CRTV ramait à contre courant des préférences et des revendications. Les contre-vérités, le culte de la personnalité développés par les journalistes qui présentent le journal en français a fini par lasser les téléspectateurs.

⁴⁷ N° 73 Thursday June 6 - June 13, 1991, p.1

Jean Jacques Ekindi without announcing the non-resignation of Mifi Section President Joseph K. Tanyi.” The minister implied that this was part of the Anglophone journalists’ attempts to sabotage the CPDM government. The suspensions were interpreted by the journalists as “part of a campaign launched by the Information and Culture Minister and CRTV General Manager Mendo Ze to stop the tide of Anglophone journalists’ objectivity on CRTV.”⁴⁸ The minister insisted on the necessity of CRTV journalists to respect the corporation’s editorial policy, a euphemism for asking all journalists to see things the government’s way. Julius Wamey was accused of having “falsely” claimed during a CRTV news flash that the South West Chiefs meeting in Kumba had called for a national conference, and that students marching in Bamenda had done same. The governor of the North West Province, in a telex to MINAT, is reported to have wondered “why government media organs are being used by journalists who are partisan to the SDF.”⁴⁹

In a “confidential” letter to the General Manager of CRTV, Prime Minister Sadou Hayatou is said⁵⁰ to have called for severe sanctions against Anglophone journalists who were using the official media to “try government”. The Prime Minister is reported to have accused, among others, “Cameroon Calling” and the English news of having “more and more exhibited reckless abandon ... in their analysis which have of late seemed like an arraignment of government action.” In his letter he complained that “newscasters on radio and television have tended to express their personal standpoints as if they were those of government.” He concluded by instructing the General Manager to “verify this situation and

⁴⁸ *Cameroon Post* N° 73 Thursday June 6 - June 13, 1991, p.1

⁴⁹ *Cameroon Post* N° 73 Thursday June 6 - June 13, 1991, p.1

⁵⁰ see *Cameroon Post* N° 77 Tuesday July 30-August 6, 1991, p.3

where necessary address a severe warning to such personnel who should not turn a public service into a private media with a tendency to teleguide [remote control] government action.”

While some Anglophone journalists in the public media have, their disillusionment notwithstanding, identified with the PR role expected of them by government, others have opted either to leave the system entirely (e.g. Boh Herbert⁵¹, Charlie Ndichia⁵², Eric Chinje⁵³, Victor Epie Ngome, Orlando Bama, Larry Eyong-Echaw, Ben Bongang and Julius Wamey), or to distance themselves from official rhetoric whenever they can (e.g. Ebssiy Ngum, Wain Paul Ngam and Asonglefac Nkemeleke). According to *The Diasporan*⁵⁴, of the nearly 50 reporters and announcers who started or joined television in its first 3 years of existence, 27 (of whom 21 Anglophones) had, by April 1994, “departed in bitterness and disillusionment to seek better climes”. Those who are ready to be PR journalists, claim that all the government and its acolytes do is well and in the best interest of Anglophones and Cameroon in general, and that the radical opposition, the All Anglophone Conference (AAC) and the Cameroon Anglophone Movement (CAM) are

⁵¹ see his interview with *Challenge Hebdo* (N° 045 du 31 octobre au 06 novembre 1991, p.14-15) for his reasons for leaving CRTV and resigning from the civil service.

⁵² For more on Charlie Ndichia and his problems as journalist in Cameroon and in CRTV, see *Le Messenger* N° 024 Special Edition, Thursday April 25, 1991, p.12, and N° 003 Thursday January 23, 1992, p.11.

⁵³ For Eric Chinje’s account of why and how he left CRTV, see the Fondation Friedrich-Ebert (1993), *Le Rôle des Médias dans le Processus Démocratique au Cameroun* (P.133)

⁵⁴ See N° 001 of Friday April 14, 1995, which devotes its front and central pages to television in Cameroon, “a revolution that ate its children”. The articles or testimonies are by Eric Chinje, Julius Wamey, Melissa Nambangi and Orlando Bama, all of whom are former CRTV journalists living and/or studying in the USA. *The Diasporan* is US-based and has as editor-in-chief Julius Wamey.

void of true patriots and motivated only by selfish, regional, or tribal self-interests.⁵⁵ Among the critical journalists are those who argue that the radical opposition and extremist pressure groups stand for “the truth” and the best interest of Anglophones or of Cameroon, and that the government and its allies are dissemblers who are motivated by selfish ambitions, the greed for power and other selfish pursuits.

Many Anglophone journalists in CRTV who rapidly distanced themselves from their role as government spokesmen or mouthpieces following the launching of the SDF, rechanneled their energies in the service of the marginalised Anglophone community. But using the official media to articulate societal problems and aspirations have met with stiff resistance from the authorities. The turbulent history of critical English language CRTV programmes such as “Cameroon Calling” (formally “Cameroon Report”), “Minute by Minute” and “Luncheon Date” are sufficient testimony of government discomfort with Anglophone critical-mindedness and purportedly heightened sense of public accountability.

CRTV management has often silenced or dissipated criticism through the disciplinary transfer of the critical journalists involved. Vociferous and critical newscasters like Julius Wamey have been moved from the newsroom, some like Anembom Munju and Larry Eyang Echaw kept away from the microphone, while others like Sam Nuvala Fonkem and Angela Tabe have been recalled to the Ministry for administrative

⁵⁵ For an idea of what Anglophones have on their agenda during the current democratisation process, see Atabe Ettankia’s “chronology of the Anglophone struggle” in *Cameroon Post* N° 216, April 29-May 1, 1994, p.10; see also *Cameroon Life* (vol. I N° 3 August 1990, pp. 6-10; vol. I N° 5 October 1990, pp. 6-11; vol. I N° 12 October 1991, pp.26-27; vol. II N° 3 March 1992, pp. 8- 14; vol. III N° 6 July 1992, pp.8-16; vol.II N° 8 May 1993, pp.8-20; vol. II N° 10 October 1993, pp.10-17&24-26)

functions. Following the controversial edition of “Cameroon Calling” on multiparty democracy of May 6, 1990, the authorities of CRTV signed a decision transferring Ntemfac Ofege and Boh Herbert away from Yaounde, both of whom had resigned their duty posts after refusing to sign an apology letter addressed to the General Manager by their colleagues after detention. But the two, instead of honouring the decision, opted to resign from CRTV.⁵⁶ As political tensions increased in Bamenda, especially after the launching of the SDF, the Governor of the North West Province banned the rebroadcast in the local radio of “Cameroon Calling,” claiming that the programme “incited the population to violence and revolt.”⁵⁷

In June 1992, members of the “Cameroon Calling” production team (Benn Bongang, Zac Angafor and Akwanka Joe Ndifor), amongst others, were appointed and transferred in various capacities to CRTV provincial stations. A move seen by those concerned as a calculated attempt by government to “kill” a programme that has never ceased to embarrass it; especially following the decision by the CRTV deputy General Manager Emmanuel Nguimba Nloutsiri⁵⁸ to subject “Cameroon Calling” to unprecedented administrative censorship. In the said note of service, the Deputy General Manager accused the crew of “Cameroon Calling” of disrespecting the numerous warnings from the hierarchy, by continuing to use the programme “to put the government to trial”. He accused some of the journalists of not hesitating to question the integrity of the highest authorities in the state, but often without any proof to back their allegations. Others, he

⁵⁶ see *Cameroon Post*, N° 46 Thursday October 16 - 25, 1990, p.1 and *Le Messenger* N° 009 Tuesday October 23, 1990, p.4 for more on the story

⁵⁷ See *The Herald* N° 073, Monday, January 3-5, 1994, p.5.

⁵⁸ see Note de Service N° 00060 de 8 juin 1992, published in *Le Messenger* N° 267 du 18 juin 1992

said, did not hesitate to incite the population to revolt, and by so doing, were endangering national unity. He called on them to understand that CRTV is a public utility and a privileged instrument for the propagation of the activities of government.

To put an end to “ce laisser-aller préjudiciable à l’action des pouvoirs publics et à la stabilité des institutions,” the Deputy General Manager prescribed, *inter alia*, that “Cameroon Calling” be henceforth taped and no longer presented live as was the case before then. The taped programme must be submitted for the critical appreciation of either the Director of Information or his deputy, or the editor-in-chief for features. “The certified approval of one of these authorities is necessary before the programme can be broadcast.” Finally, the above named gatekeepers were expected to give a weekly report on the effective implementation of this prescription.

On February 2, 1994, the General Manager of CRTV took decision N° 00012 following “instructions from above,” to send Tamfu Hanson Ghandi, Metuge Alfred Sone and Viban Napoleon Bongadzem to the Ministry of Communication. The crime of these journalists was the non-respect of CRTV’s editorial policy.⁵⁹

Also in February 1994⁶⁰ Angele Tabe Ndie was sent to the ministry because of “Indiscipline et légèreté dans le traitement

⁵⁹ see for example the letter by Deputy editor-in-chief of Information (radio), Chris Enoh Oben, dated 31/01/1994, to CRTV General Manager, accusing Tamfu Hanson Ghandi of clandestine publicity for *Cameroon Post*, a newspaper “which is not only notoriously anti-government, but also an officious propaganda organ of the SDF party.” Tamfu Hanson Ghandi, he claimed, “has the habit of selling newsroom material (e.g GCE results) to private newspapers” for which he writes regularly using a pen-name.

⁶⁰ see decision N° 00027/CRTV/DG/DAF/SDPeI, 25 Fev. 1994

de l'information". She had been accused, in October 1992⁶¹ of having "attended the press conference of the Minister of Communications on the 26th of October 1992, without having been assigned by CRTV Editorial Desk" and for having "asked questions on behalf of the corporation, questions that seemed to placed [sic] the corporation on a defence." Also queried in connection with that same press conference were Wain Paul Ngam and Orlando Bama. Wain Paul Ngam was accused of "tarnishing the image of CRTV" after he suggested, in his question, that the minister's report on the burning to death of the D.O. of Muyuka, Gideon Manko Ngum and Alhadji Tita Fomukong, leader of the Cameroon National Party (CNP), by opposition partisans was biased. Orlando Bama, on his part, was guilty for wanting to know why Biya had turned up on TV "unkempt" despite having "competent" image-makers. On October 12 1992, James Achanyi Fontem was suspended for broadcasting election results that had not been issued by MINAT. Other victims of similar decisions include Victor Epie Ngome who left Cameroon for the BBC for six months, and Francis Niba recalled to the ministry from Bertoua for professional indiscretion.

According to Philip Ndi,⁶² Anglophone interests are marginalised in CRTV because "there is nobody who actually represents the Anglophones at CRTV," and "decisions are taken arbitrarily and nobody raises an eye brow". He argues that "many decisions are taken not only to frustrate Anglophone Journalists but to minimise and discredit their efforts."

As an institution, CRTV has seldom been comfortable reporting the truth about any Anglophone movement, initiative

⁶¹ see confidential query N° 00011/CRTV/DG/DPACRA of October 28, 1992, signed for the General Manager by Peter Essoka

⁶² *The Herald* N° 022, Wednesday January 13 - 20, 1993, p.4

or programme of action. An example of CRTV's unprofessional journalism in this connection is that of the 3 pm radio news of Wednesday April 27, 1994 concerning the second All Anglophone Conference (AACII). An announcement was read to the effect that the AACII scheduled to hold in Bamenda from April 29 to May 1 had been postponed by the convenors. It was purported to have been signed by Dr Simon Munzu, Dr Carlson Anyangwe and Barrister Sam Ekontang Elad. A claim the three refuted. The AAC spokesman, Dr Simon Munzu, prepared a disclaimer for broadcast by CRTV, but this was rejected. CRTV was even unable to provide Dr Munzu with a copy of the announcement alleged to have been signed by him and his colleagues.⁶³

Anglophones are of the consistent impression that CRTV is there not so much to respond to their aspirations, but rather to stifle initiative and sense of identity in them. The choice to construct the FM transmitter for the South West province in Douala instead, was criticised by Anglophone interest groups (e.g. SWELA) and by the media, and taken as another proof of government's bad faith towards the Anglophones. On a visit to CRTV Buea on Tuesday November 16 1993, the General Manager of CRTV, explained that the choice of Douala was purely a technical one made by Japanese technicians, and not political as rumoured. According to the General Manager, the Japanese engineers who did the studies during the "ghost town" period in 1991, had combed the South West province thoroughly and found its mountainous nature a disadvantage. However, the Anglophone press and opinion leaders still felt that the decision to construct the transmitter in Douala was political and deliberate by the authorities who are so concerned with the oil in Limbe that they feared what might happen if

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for more see *Cameroon Post* N° 216 April 29 - May 1, 1994, p.2

Buea, given the current trend of sentiments among critical Anglophone leaders and public, were to be cut off from the rest of Cameroon and made capital for a seceding West or Southern Cameroons. So many people thought that the Government wants to be in control of access to radio technology, to be able to cut off transmission if need be.⁶⁴

Indeed, the Anglophones are so suspicious of government and its designs, that their first instinct is always to disbelieve that the government can act in good faith.⁶⁵ A government which one of them describes as “traditionally cocky, arrogant, lethargic and extremely callous”⁶⁶. In addition, Anglophones generally tend to see the Francophones as essentially dishonest. To Victor Epie Ngome, “Anglophones see Francophones as fundamentally fraudulent, superficial and given to bending rules: cheating at exams, jumping queues, rigging elections ...” (quoted in Atanga, 1994:126). Thus when Bamenda went without television from September 19, 1993 to March 24, 1994, because of a blown electronic tube at the relay centre, there were talks of deliberate victimisation of Bamenda by government. Despite expert reports that the failure had been purely technical, the public was not convinced. They insisted that in other places which had suffered similar black-outs

⁶⁴ For more on the FM affair see *The Herald* N° 073, Monday January 3-5, 1994, p.3; *Cameroon Post* N° 0191 November 24-December 1, 1993, P.13

⁶⁵ In the on-going democratic process, the Anglophone provinces have identified their governors with ruthless repression more than has any other province. The South West provincial governor, for taking the decision in 1993 to use the military to forcibly recover unpaid taxes and to stop smuggling, had his name - Oben Peter Ashu - corrupted to “Obey Peter Shoot”. In the North West province the governor, Bell Luc René was nicknamed “Bend Look Grenade,” in protest of the “excessive” use of hand grenades by police, gendarmes and soldiers during the “Ghost Town” period and during the State of Emergency.

⁶⁶ see *Cameroon Post* N° 71 Monday May 27-30, 1991, p.6

(Sangmelima, Ebolowa and Kousseri), their situation had been corrected within two weeks. Why should Bamenda be different, it was asked, were it not for the government's decision to deprive the population of television images?⁶⁷

To Anglophones, it is clear from the content and language of programmes that television is preponderantly for Francophones. French is the dominant language⁶⁸ and French interests seem not only more important than English interests, but are even superior to Cameroonian concerns and priorities⁶⁹. It is possible and indeed quite regular that newscasts on CRTV are shifted (displaced) from their normal time slots in order to make way for the transmission of French football encounters. Not once has any English league match been retransmitted in a similar manner, and it is not often that local matches or Cameroon's own international encounters get televised.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ see *Cameroon Post*, April 6-13, 1994, p.2

⁶⁸ Complaints like the following by Dr Zama Kimbi Ndefru III (see *Cameroon Post* N° Saturday, April 14-21, 1990, P.2), are very frequent in the Anglophone press and are shared by the entire Anglophone community:

The English speaking viewers seem to be placed on a disadvantage even though entertainment programmes like Starcky et Hutch, Arnold et Willie, Colombo, Santa Barbara and Lucky Luke were originally in English.

Taxes aside if the rights of all Cameroonians as citizens of this country mean anything, a second channel should be an unquestionable right. The two Cultures have to co-exist on equal basis.

⁶⁹ Eric Chinje recalls (see *The Diasporan*, N° 001 of Friday April 14, 1995, p.10) that during his years as editor-in-chief for TV news, there was a strong "Francophone Lobby" the membership of which ranged from a team of police investigators "demanding to know why there was so much English on television," to the French ambassador who claimed that Eric Chinje was not a friend of France ("vous n'êtes pas un ami de la France") because Anglophones on TV "were outperforming the Francophones".

⁷⁰ *La Nouvelle Expression* (N° 015 mars 1993 P.14) has wondered why

Thus faced with such resistance, critical Anglophone journalists in the official media have, thanks to the December 1990 communication law, used the English language private newspapers, some of them under pen names, to insert Anglophone problems, concerns and aspirations on the national political, cultural and economic agendas.

Together with their counterparts in the critical English language press, the liberation journalists of the official media are eager to expose the contradictions and inconsistencies in the policies and actions of the Cameroonian leadership. They argue that until government starts addressing the problems of the Anglophone minority in Cameroon⁷¹, it will remain an obstacle to the country's economic progress and social justice. They criticise the rigid suppression by government of contending social forces, especially those of Anglophone origin. They blame most of Cameroon's current socio-political

the General Manager of CRTV "s'obstine à inonder l'écran de la Télévision Nationale de matches sans importance du championnat français. Cela, alors même que les téléspectateurs qui paient mensuellement la taxe audiovisuelle n'ont même pas le droit de visionner les matches des équipes nationales camerounaises ne serait-ce qu'en différé."

⁷¹ Anglophones generally tend to believe that their union with Francophone Cameroon has not worked in their interest. They feel a sense of alienation and marginalisation, and a lot of them, persuaded by the arguments of the CAM and the AAC, have developed an interest for the reinvention of the state of West or Southern Cameroon. Indeed, as Dr Munzu, Dr Anyangwe, Lawyer Elad and Mr. Benjamin Itoe, have argued (see *Le Messenger* N° 016 Monday April 27, 1992, p.11), "In view of the distinct history, experiences and characteristics of their territory, the inhabitants of the British Southern Cameroon and their leaders would not have voted in favour of reunification with the Republic of Cameroon in 1961 if at that date, reunification had been presented to them as a process whereby, within a period of ten years, their territory would be annexed by the Republic of Cameroon".

and economic crises on the lack of accountability of successive Francophone dominated governments, and present the Anglophone and the rigour and selflessness in public service in 'the good old days' of Southern Cameroons as the model. They identify with and are proud of the achievements of the Anglo-saxon culture worldwide. Theirs, the Anglo-saxon culture, "has been tested and its validity adequately proved," and all Anglophones must take advantage of this identity, "rather than seeking to be Francophones only to wind up ridiculous cultural mulattoes to be jeered at and patronised"⁷². And in this endeavour, their "heroics" received commendation from the Cameroon Association of English-Speaking Journalists (CAMASEJ).⁷³

I see the current Anglophone journalism of liberation as a journalism of anger and disillusionment. The liberation journalists approach their news-gathering with a set of attitudes and opinions which have often biased their news-reporting in favour of the Anglophone community and the myth of Anglophone superiority. The ability of liberation journalists to give all sides of the story, to avoid biased language, comment and opinion in their news-stories and reports, has been crippled by the need to present the Anglophones as a righteous community struggling to stay good and upright in a country turned into a Sodom or a Gomorrah by sensuous, irresponsible squander-maniacs and degenerates: the Francophones. Much as the Anglophone community would like its journalists to see things their way, it is in the interest of both the journalists and the community to face up to reality. For social truth is a matter of consensus between competing perspectives, especially in a plural context like Cameroon where how one perceives a phenomenon is contingent on one's cultural or ideological

⁷² *Cameroon Post* N° 71 Monday May 27-30, 1991, p.6

⁷³ see *Le Messager* vol. 11 N° 008 Friday February 28, 1992, p.10

standpoint.

If CRTV and its journalists are to make an active and positive contribution to democratisation, their focus must be on the common denominators, and not on what puts Cameroonians asunder. Unless they can detach themselves from their prior values and beliefs by seeking to report facts with utmost objectivity, their prejudices and personal biases (wishes, motives, emotions) would often lead them, as has been the case in the last four years, to misrepresent or distort the very democracy they want to promote.

(iii) *Cameroon Tribune*, SOPECAM and the democratic process

The reaction of *Cameroon Tribune*, the official paper, to increasing demands for pluralism and democratisation, has been similar to that of CRTV examined above. And public dissatisfaction with the paper's uncritical support of government and the CPDM, was evidenced by a significant drop in sales following the new communication law and the subsequent proliferation of private newspapers critical of government. According to Philippe Gaillard of *Jeune Afrique Plus*,⁷⁴ sales of *Cameroon Tribune* which used to be above sixty thousand copies a day, fell to less than twenty thousand, as the traditional readership found attraction in the anti-government press. As for the English edition, readership dropped to less than 2,000. Among certain sections of the hypercritical public, *Cameroon Tribune* was nicknamed 'Pravda'. The critical public lost interest in reading the daily exoneration of members of the 'Chop People Dem Moni'/'la Rigueur Depasse le Peuple Camerounais' (CPDM/RDPC) club.

⁷⁴. see N° 12, mai-juin 1991, p.34

As a printing and publishing house, the government controlled SOPECAM can be said to have preferred staying out of business and risking closure as a result of financial difficulties, to allowing free competition between the opposition and the pro-government press. Thus under the instigation of the Minister of Information and Culture, SOPECAM set up, in 1991, a unit to re-read critical private papers before deciding on their printing.⁷⁵ Questioned on this by journalists of the private press, the minister declared: “vous n’êtes pas du tout obligés d’apporter vos journaux à la SOPECAM. Vous les y apportez au cas où vous y trouvez votre intérêt.”⁷⁶

Another mechanism of control used by SOPECAM was to delay printing or not to print at all the private papers for an alleged want of material. During the Yaounde Plan of action in July 1991, many opposition papers were not printed. The reason given by SOPECAM being that the blockade imposed on Douala sea port by the “Ghost Town” had made it difficult for them to import the material necessary for printing. But the pro-government *Cameroon Tribune* and *Le Patriote* for example, continued to be printed.

SOPECAM is reported to have, during that period, insisted that the critical private papers cut down their print run. According to *La Messagère*⁷⁷, using paper shortage as an excuse, SOPECAM proposed that the French edition of *Le Messenger* “cuts down its print run from 80.000 copies to 10.000 ... while

⁷⁵ *La Messagère* (N° 001 Monday September 2, 1991, p.1) reports that this decision cost SOPECAM some FCFA 50,000,000 monthly, when the major critical private papers (*Le Messenger*, *Cameroon Post*, *Challenge Hebdo* and *La Nouvelle Expression*) opted to go elsewhere for their printing.

⁷⁶ see *Cameroon Tribune* N° 4824, mercredi 13 février 1991, p.12-13 for full text of the minister’s reaction to accusations of censorship at SOPECAM.

⁷⁷ N° 001 Monday September 2, 1991, p.1

the English Edition which was beginning to rise towards a 30 thousand print run was ordered down to 5.000.” *Le Messenger* retorted by offering to buy its newsprint from abroad.

However, following devaluation in January 1994 and given the worsening economic crisis, the job of SOPECAM and the other censors in MINAT was made easier as the price of newsprint skyrocketed, forcing Rotoprint, in February 1995, to increase the cost of printing and forcing most newspapers out of circulation (see (C) (i) below).

All that SOPECAM did, the papers in question perceived as censorship. They decided to look elsewhere to print their papers, and only those without a choice stayed on. As a reaction, Benjamin Zebaze, publisher of *Challenge Hebdo*, set up a private printing house, Rotoprint at Bonaberi in Douala. In the quest for alternatives, other papers (e.g. *Cameroon Post*, *Post Watch*, *The Herald*, *Cameroon Life* and *Times & Life*) went across to Nigeria. Later on when these papers ran into difficulties printing in Nigeria, most of them reverted to Rotoprint. The government, which must have felt defeated, in May 1992, sent troops to besiege Rotoprint and to make printing difficult for it. This siege must have reached such intensity during the run-up to and shortly after the October 1992 presidential elections that even the owner of Rotoprint, Zebaze of *Challenge Hebdo*, was forced to start printing in Nigeria as well.

The SOPECAM-private press problem in Cameroon is similar to the situation in other African countries, where, according to Meyer, the bureaucratic management of state monopolies like SOPECAM and the conditions they give, “ont rapidement amené la presse privée à se passer de leurs services,” preferring to address themselves “à de petites entreprises privées, avec tous les inconvénients que cela comporte” (Meyer, 1994:19).

The witch-hunt by *Cameroon Tribune* against the critical

private press has caused financial problems. Thus in 1991 SOPECAM workers had to go on strike before their September salaries were paid. In November 1991 they again went on strike for 8 days, and only after their October salaries were paid, did *Cameroon Tribune* resume publication⁷⁸. On Thursday July 15, 1993, the paper once again disappeared from the newsstands as the workers started a sit-in strike that was to last till August 31, 1993⁷⁹; the reason being the nonpayment of salaries for four months. The “serious financial crisis and other difficulties” of SOPECAM are a fact admitted by its general manager during its 4th extraordinary Board of Governors meeting on August 26 1992.⁸⁰ During the meeting the Board chairman recommended cuts in work force and further reductions in advantages in order “to rescue the company from collapse”.⁸¹ The massive lay-offs today are a further sign of the company’s weakened financial position, a crisis for which *International News Hebdo* was dragged to court and sanctioned in 1991, for pre-empting.⁸²

Thus *Cameroon Tribune*’s political role as one of government’s public relations institutions, has not allowed the

⁷⁸ see N° 5019 du vendredi 29 novembre, 1991

⁷⁹ see *Cameroon Tribune*, N° 5420 vendredi 3 septembre 1993, p.1

⁸⁰ see *Cameroon Tribune* N° 1493, Friday August 28, 1992, p.4

⁸¹ For more on SOPECAM, its problems, and its role as censor, see *La Vision* (N° 021 du 28 novembre 1991, p.3); *La Messagère* (N° 015 du 17 mars 1993, p.16); *Le Messenger* (N° 278 du 16 septembre 1992, p.11; N° 349 du 14 février 1994, p.14); *Cameroon Post* (N° 123, August 28-September 4, 1992, p.1&15); *Post Watch* (N° 002 11 décembre 1992 p.5); *Post Watch* (N° 020 du 24 novembre 1992, p.4-5); *Challenge Hebdo* (N° 0039 du 10 au 17 juillet 1991, p.6; N° 0049 du 27 novembre au 4 décembre 1991, p.15; N° 0050 du 4 au 11 décembre 1991, p.7; N° 0083 du 2 septembre 1992, p.3); *La Nouvelle Expression* (N° 033 du 21 au 27 janvier 1992, p.14); and *Cameroon Tribune* (N° 1493, August 28, 1992, p.1)

⁸² see *Cameroon Tribune* N° 4894 mardi 28 mai 1991, p.1&9 for a report of the court case between SOPECAM and *International News Hebdo*

paper the critical distance it needs to play the role of neutral mediator between the competing forces in Cameroon's democratisation process. Also the serious financial problems facing SOPECAM have compounded the difficulties of news-gathering and news-production, and made the paper even less credible in its current 8-page bilingual edition. The lack of job security for *Cameroon Tribune* journalists has negatively affected professionalism as journalists seek to make ends meet through unprofessional practices, usually referred to in a derogatory manner as "le journalisme de Gombo".

(i) The Official Media and Opposition Politics

In Cameroon, like elsewhere, multipartyism has tended to go with a multiplicity of newspapers. Shortly before and after independence when many political parties existed, there were about 70 publications in circulation. Today, four years after the law liberalising certain aspects of mass communication, there are over 400 registered titles⁸³, most of which are irregular, and some of which have disappeared from circulation because of the fading political fortunes of their founders and/or because of the difficult economic situation.⁸⁴

⁸³. According to MINAT (1993:9), there are "Plus de 400 titres déclarés auprès des Préfets. Titres qui interviennent dans les domaines aussi variés que la politique, l'économie, la culture, la vie professionnelle, les loisirs, le sport, la musique, la religion, bref tous les aspects de la vie en société".

⁸⁴ Examples are: *La Lettre du Cameroun*, *Nouvelles du Cameroun*, *Libre Hebdo*, *Peuple d'Afrique*, *Le Mont Cameroun*, *L'Aurore*, *Le Démocrate*, *Le Républicain*, *Le Libéral*, *Ce Soir*, *Le Combattant*, *The Times*, *New Times*, *Cameroon League*, *The Cameroon Mirror*, *Cameroon Now*, *Univers Débat*, *The New Standard*, *The Shepherd*, *Contact Magazine*, *Cameroon Express*, *Horizons*, *The Spark*, *Le Nouvelle République*, *Le Renouvateur*, *English Times*, *CRTV Magazine*, *Life & Times*, *Aspect*, *Cameroon Now*, *Cameroon Today*, *Le Peuple*, *Day Dawn*, *Transa Hebdo*, *The Analyst*, *The People's Voice*, *L'Informateur*, *L'Harmattan*, *The*

One can identify two main political tendencies in the media: firstly there are those who claim that all the government does is good and in the best interest of Cameroon, and that the radical opposition is void of patriots and motivated only by selfish, regional, or ethnic self-interests. These comprise the publicly owned and government-controlled Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV) and *Cameroon Tribune* on the one hand, and pro-government “privately” owned newspapers such as *Le Patriote* and *Le Témoin*.

Secondly, there are those who argue that all the radical opposition does or stands for is in the best interest of Cameroon, and that the government and its allies are only motivated by greed for power and other selfish pursuits. These comprise the bulk of the privately owned papers, amongst which are such regular publications as *Le Messenger*, *La Nouvelle Expression*, *Challenge Hebdo*, *Galaxie*, *Cameroon Post* and *The Herald*. The media are therefore, polarised into two diametrically opposing camps, each claiming to know and represent the best interests of the Cameroonian people. As Nga Ndongo (1993:168) remarks, “chaque camp semble jeter l’anathème sur l’autre” and tends to consider that “le Dieu, les anges et les saints de l’autre ne sont que Lucifer et les démons”. Guiffo, in his study of *Challenge Hebdo* and *Le Patriote*, observes that, while the former holds the government “responsible for all the ills of present-day Cameroon,” the latter is thankful for “the luck Cameroon has to have President Biya at its helm” (Guiffo, 1993:183). While Paul Biya is credited by *Le Patriote* for bringing about “la démocratie avancée,” he is accused by *Challenge Hebdo* of presiding over “l’Etat délinquant” and by *Le Messenger* for “la médiocratie devancée” in Cameroon. And if to

Guardian, *Le Progrès*, *Flash Info*, *L’Empire*, *Le Caravane*, *The Nation*, *The Spokesman*, *The Star*, *Cameroon Report*, *Maloko*, *Kamerun Nouveau*, *La Voix de L’Etudiant*, *La Vision*, *Post Watch*, *Cameroon Mon Pays*.

Le Patriote the opposition is nothing but “un ramassis d’aigris et de casseurs assoiffés de pouvoir,” to *Challenge Hebdo* and *Le Messager* “le salut du peuple passe par l’opposition (la coordination)” (Nga Ndongo, 1993:168). Some papers (e.g. *La Gazette* and *Fraternité*) flirt both with the government and the opposition, seemingly undecided where to belong.⁸⁵ So far only a few papers, amongst which *Dikalo* and *L’Effort Camerounais*, are making any conscious attempt to adopt a neutral approach.

This polarisation in the media corresponds to a similar polarisation in the Cameroonian public very well summed up by Ebssiy Ngum of CRTV⁸⁶. He observes that:

“This polarisation is worsened by the fact that Cameroonians have since become so emotional, rejecting information and accepting only opinion that determines whether you are for or against. People have lost patience with cold-headed analysis and public interests have been marginalised by partisan interests.”

During the period of “ghost towns” and civil disobedience, the radical opposition accused the official media of pro-government/CPDM bias, and increasingly turned to the anti-

⁸⁵ After the Messi Messi revelations in 1992 implicating President Paul Biya and Jeanne-Irène Biya in the bankruptcy of SCB, *La Gazette*, not very regular at the time, came out with articles in support of the presidential couple. The critical private press immediately accused *La Gazette* of having been paid “pour blanchir”. In an article comparing *La Gazette* to the washing powder “Kilav,” *Challenge Hebdo* (N° 077 du 08 juillet 1992, p.1&6) argued that the paper has refused to die completely and reserved for itself the public relations role of coming out “de temps en temps de l’oubli pour des “opérations” ponctuelles qu’il mène avec plus ou moins de bonheur.” Thus the name “L’Ozymandias’ de la presse Camerounaise” (see also *Le Messager* N° 271 du 17 juillet 1992, p.13).

⁸⁶ see “Cameroon Calling” 07/11/93

government private press to disseminate its views and strategies. The moderate opposition parties on the other hand, voiced their frustration with what they saw to be the excessive attention given the radical opposition by the media, especially the critical private press.⁸⁷ Increasingly, as the moderates identified more and more with Biya and the CPDM, the official media opened up to them. F.A. Kodock (secretary general of the legalised fraction of the UPC) for example, despite his apparent lack of legitimacy in the UPC, would continue to be accorded the airtime on CRTV that was denied his opponents like Ndeh Ntumanzah and UPC Mannidem. Woungly Massaga (alias Commandant Kissamba) of the PSP would, as member of the “Majorité Présidentielle,” be given airtime on CRTV and space in *Cameroon Tribune*, to denounce John Fru Ndi’s decision to contest Paul Biya’s victory at the October 1992 elections.⁸⁸ UNDP, UPC, MDR and the CPDM, the parties represented in parliament as a result of the March 1 1992 elections that SDF and others of the radical opposition boycotted, would be the only ones to benefit from airtime on a weekly bases in the party-political programme known as “Expression Directe”⁸⁹.

⁸⁷ One such moderate leader, Koumbin Bilitik of Union des Républicains du Cameroun (URC), was to remark during an interview with *Post Watch* (N° 002 du 11 décembre 1992, p.7) that: “J’ai longtemps eu l’impression d’avoir été censuré par les médias privés.”

⁸⁸ To Woungly Massaga, the decision by John Fru Ndi to contest the supreme court verdict was bound to be a fiasco. As he put it (see *Cameroon Tribune* N° 5255 vendredi 6 novembre 1992, p.10 for full text), revolution is a science and not something sporadic. And in any case, protesting the results was ill-advised, for, “Dans une République qui a connu pendant trente ans les fameux 99,99% imposés par le parti unique, le modeste score de la victoire du Président Biya marque un progrès remarquable vers une démocratie véritable.”

⁸⁹ see *Cameroon Tribune* N° 5071, vendredi 14 février 1992, p.13 for presidential decree N° 92/030 of February 1992; and Gisèle Menye, (1993)

And so the official media have continued to actively encourage the CPDM, President Biya and his collaborators in their repression and contradictions.⁹⁰ The call for 'glasnost' in the public media has been seen basically as a threat and a challenge by those who benefit from the status quo, and who stand to lose certain privileges from any changes. They cannot withstand the challenge, stimulation and debate that a genuinely free and accessible CRTV or *Cameroon Tribune* promises.

The lack of credibility by the official media, from 1990 to 1992 especially, was made all the more acute by a virulent emergent private press. Administrative censorship epitomised by the blank spaces⁹¹ (see Table 1) in the critical private papers

for analysis.

⁹⁰ A case in point of how CRTV reacts to government contradictions, was the issue of the devaluation of the FCFA. In December 1993 the Friedrich Ebert Foundation organised a workshop on devaluation which was attended by economists, academics and bankers, but not by CRTV. On the 1 pm newscast of 30/12/93, Roger Betala, economic affairs journalist, argued that it was unwise for some people to organise seminars and meetings to debate the devaluation of the FCFA, while knowing fully well that all polemics on the issue of devaluation would inevitably lead to the fall of the government and discourage businessmen from investing in Cameroon. The Minister of Finance, Antione Ntsimi was categorical on CRTV that there would be no devaluation. Yet shortly after the refusal, the FCFA was devalued in January 1994 and the Cameroonian Minister of Finance asked to read the final communique in Dakar. The same Roger Betala then went on the air to talk about the advantages of a devalued currency.

On January 14, 1994 at a press conference, the Minister of Commerce and Industry, Patrice Mandeng Ambassa, declared that the prices of basic commodities would not change, following devaluation. CRTV announced it and commented favourably. On Wednesday January 19, Mandeng Ambassa issued a communique doubling the prices of flour, bread, sugar and drugs. CRTV came in to stress the importance or need for prices to be doubled. Two days after, the minister revoked the decision, and CRTV was there to find a *raison d'être* for the move.

⁹¹ Although the law punishes the partial- or non-respect of censorship decisions, these papers deliberately left signs of the fact that their

together with arbitrary arrests of their journalists, intimidations, invasion of offices, printing houses and kiosks for seizures only further endeared these papers with the disenchanted public.

dummies had been censored. Such signs ranged from blank paragraphs and pages, through cancellations with simple straight lines over the censored text, to the inscription of “CENSURE”/”CENSORED” on the affected paragraphs or pages. Such practices are punished, a censor explained, because “obéir lentement n’est pas obéir”. Amougou gives the example of *Cameroon Post* (French), *Le Nouvel Indépendant* and *Cameroon Mon Pays* which were either seized or suspended for partial- or non-respect of the censor’s decision (Amougou, 1994:150).

TABLE 1a: Examples of Blank or Crossed Paragraphs and Pages in Newspapers due to Censorship

RECORD OF PRESS CENSORSHIP IN CAMEROON			
	PAPER	ISSUE	PAGES CENSORED
1	LE MESSENGER (ENGLISH)	Vol.II N° 024 Mon. June 29, 1992	3,5,9,
		N° 007 Wed. Oct. 3, 1990	2,4,5,14,15
		N° 024 Special Edition Thurs April 25, 1991	2,3,
		N° 016 Thurs Jan. 24, 1990	2,3,8,10,15
		N° 010 Frid. Nov. 2, 1990	2,3,7,
		N° 009 Tues. Oct 23, 1990	7,14,15,16
		N° 012 Tues. Nov. 27, 1990	3,5,6,
		N° 014 Mon. Dec. 17, 1990	10,
		N° 008 Tues. Oct. 16, 1990	6,8,9,11,
		N° 017 Tues. Feb. 5, 1991	2,3,14
		N° 018 Mon. Feb. 18, 1991	2,3,4,12
2	CAMEROON POST (ENG)	N° 115 July 2-9, 1992 N° 112 June 12-19, 1992	3,5,12 1
		N° 114 June 25-July 2, 1992	2,4,8,
		N° 113 June 17-24, 1992	1,2,4,
		N° 52 Mon. Dec. 03-10, 1990	1,11,15
		N° 146 Jan. 27, 1993 (amongst	5,8,9

		the articles censored was the title: “Mr Biya signed Communal Liberalism”; and Rotcod Gobata’s No Trifling Matter on “If something pass you why you no leavam.”)	
		N° 142 Jan. 7-14, 1993 (the censored articles were: “Detainees trip to Kondengui,” “Bamenda detainees speak out. Parts of page 7 and all of pages 8 and 9 were censored.)	7,8,9
		N° 53 Mon. Dec 10-17, 1990	1,6
3	LE MESSAGER (FRENCH)	N° 208 du 14 Dec. 1990 N° 210 & 211 du 24 Jan. 1991	5 1,6,24
		N° 212 du 30 Jan. 1991	3
		N° 213 du 05 Fev. 1991	1,5,13
		N° 214 du 15 Fev. 1991	1,3,7
		N° 216 du 28 Fev. 1991	1
		N° 219 du 14 Mars 1991	12
		N° 220 du 21 Mars 1991	6
		N° 221 du 27 Mars 1991	1,5,15
		N° 224 du 18 Avril 1991	3,15
		N° 225 du 25 Avril 1991	3,4
		N° 269 du 2 Juillet 1992	2,3

TABLE 1b: Examples of Blank or Crossed Paragraphs and Pages in Newspapers due to Censorship

RECORD OF PRESS CENSORSHIP IN CAMEROON			
	PAPER	ISSUE	PAGES CENSORED
4 .	CHALLENGE HEBDO	N° 015 du 9 au 16 Jan. 1991 N° 023 du 13 au 19 Mars 1991	5,13,15 1,3
		N° 026 du 03 au 10 Avril 1991 (All 4 pages blank, but for Ras-le-bol & an ad in p1&15 respectively. contrast this with No 077 which is equally heavily censored but whose censored articles can still be read because editors have merely drawn thin lines across them.	1,5,6,15
		N° 070 du 19 Mai 1992	6,7,13
		N° 072 du 03 Juin 1992	2
		N° 074 du 17 Juin 1992	1,2,6,10
		N° 077 du 08 Juillet 1992 (most censored, yet all articles could be read)	1,2,3,4,5 ,6,13
		N° 078 du 15 Juillet 1992	4,5,6,7,10
		N° 079 du 22 Juillet 1992	5,10
5 .	LA VISION	N° 040 du Juin 1992	8

		N° 041 du 15 Juin 1992	2,3,4,6,9 ,10,11,15
	GALAXIE	N° 041 du 05 Juin 1992	4,5,6
		N° 042 du 15 Juin 1992	2
		N° 044 du 30 Juin 1992	2,4,5,7,8 ,13,14
	L'OPINION	N° 045 du 09 Juillet 1992	3
	LE TRIBUN	N° 002 du 26 Mai 1992	15
	LA DETENTE	N° 070 du 01 Juillet 1992	2,3
	LA NOUVELLE EXPRESSION	N° 051 du 26 Mai- 02 Juin 1992 N° 055 du 23 au 29 Juin 1992	4,15 9
	POSTWATCH	N° 003 du 17 Décembre, 1992	4,5,6,7
		N° 006 du Mardi 12 Jan., 1993	2,4,

This chapter examines the legal framework within which the mass media operate, with the basic assumption that the media can only play an effective role in the democratisation of society, if the law and its application are democratic.

(i) Critical Analysis of the Press Law

In 1990 parliament voted law N° 90/052 of December 19, 1990 on Freedom of Mass Communication.⁹² In 1993 the Fondation Friedrich Ebert (FFE) funded a study of the law by Le Cabinet JURIC in collaboration with Professor Maurice Kamto of IRIC. Published in October 1993 under the title *Le Droit de la Presse au Cameroun: Etude Comparative et prospective*, the study critically examines every article of the said law. The authors start with the postulate that every control of the press must be undertaken within the confines of the exigences of democracy, such as to guarantee a subtle equilibrium where the law can protect some without stifling others (FFE, 1993:8).

While recognising the law's "évolution remarquable par rapport aux dispositions antérieures," the authors note, *inter alia*, the following weaknesses with it:

On foreign news organs, they argue that by considering as foreign every newspaper with headquarters outside Cameroon (cf. article 22), the law does not recognise Cameroonian proprietorship for any news publication originating from outside the territory. The condition that such foreign publications must be deposited in two copies at the Ministries

^{92.} see *Jeune Afrique Economie* (N° 140, février 1991, 119-139) for Jean-Vincent Tchiénehom's presentation of and comments on the law.

of Foreign Affairs, Territorial Administration, Communication, and Justice, 24 hours prior to circulation, “montre la volonté du législateur camerounais à contrôler les informations en provenance de l'étranger.” Like the press law in other Francophone countries inspired by the French Law of July 29 1881, the Cameroonian law authorises MINAT to ban the distribution, circulation and sale in Cameroon of foreign news publications. The authors see in this an attempt by the authorities to limit access to information for Cameroonians, in flagrant contradiction of article 19 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (FFE, 1993:9-10).

The law makes it possible for government to justify even the impossible and the ridiculous in matters of censorship. As they argue “Un contrôle administratif, même a posteriori, est toujours capable de “brandir une raison d'Etat” ou un “intérêt diplomatique” pour restreindre la liberté de presse (FFE, 1993:10). The law is more interested in policing, sanctioning or controlling the press, than in guaranteeing the freedoms and rights of the media and journalists. The authors note that the rules of policing the press “révèlent sans doute la volonté plus ou moins affirmée de restreindre le droit des citoyens à s'informer, à s'exprimer et à répandre leurs opinions” (FFE, 1993:10-11).

In practice, the authors note, a MINAT civil servant “apprécie souverainement de l'ordre public et des bonnes moeurs” (FFE, 1993:12). They agree that the choice allowed the publishers to deposit either the dummies or copies of the already printed paper, “a créé en pratique une situation confuse” (FFE, 1993:12). They observe that some administrative authorities “ont exigé le dépôt exclusif des morasses qui leur permettraient de procéder à des censures partielles, moins spectaculaires, quoique plus grossières” (FFE, 1993:12). They argue that:

“... depuis 1991, ce régime a donné lieu à beaucoup d'arbitraire se traduisant par la censure exagérée ou la saisie fantaisiste de journaux par rapport à la menace de trouble à l'ordre public. Les directeurs de publication des principaux organes de presse privés ont réagi en décidant de ne plus déposer auprès des autorités compétentes que des exemplaires prêts pour la mise en circulation, ainsi qu'ils en ont le choix aux termes de la loi. L'administration ne l'entendant pas de cette oreille a décidé de la suspension des titres concernés, lesquels se sont installés pendant une certaine période dans la clandestinité. Il apparaît ainsi que la loi peut donner lieu, sur ce point à des interprétations divergentes, et qu'elle a été, en tout état de cause, à l'origine d'un grave conflit entre l'administration et la presse privée, conflit dont la liberté de presse a fait les frais” (FFE, 1993:12-13).

Although provision has been made for publishers dissatisfied with the way censorship is conducted to take their case to court, the authors confess that the law does not make this very practicable. Reason enough, they argue, for censorship to be lifted. For, “aucune forme de censure, de saisie ou d'interdiction de journaux en période normale par l'administration ne peut garantir la liberté de presse” (FFE, 1993:14). Cameroon has taken exception from most democratic states by taking censorship outside the jurisdiction of the law courts. Cameroon is also alone, even when compared with other African countries, to prescribe “censorship” in name, while “de façon générale, le mot censure est quasiment tabou dans les législations des Etats modernes sur la presse” (FFE, 1993:13). Indeed, “on ne rencontre pratiquement nulle part ailleurs des dispositions d'une telle

gravité pour la survie de la liberté de la presse” (FFE, 1993:13). They recommend that the law courts alone should have the powers to “prendre des mesures de saisie ou d’interdiction, ou encore, autoriser la prise de telles mesures par l’administration et dans des cas exceptionnels” (FFE, 1993:14).

The authors criticise the law’s blanket condemnation of “incitation to crime and wrongful conduct,” without taking time like in most modern states, to facilitate and “objectively” the task of the jurist, by enumerating these incitations. On this, “la législation camerounaise garde un silence suspect qui pourrait bien nuire à une réelle expression de la presse. La détermination des délits de presse permettrait de sanctionner assez facilement toutes provocations aux crimes et délits commises par voie de presse, en appliquant directement la loi” (FFE, 1993:18).

On the issue of falsehood, the authors argue that elsewhere the practice is to check this through codes of ethics than through the law as in Cameroon (FFE, 1993:22).

On the right to reply, the authors note that in Cameroon, this right can be exercised “même en l’absence d’une atteinte à l’honneur ou à la considération d’une personne” (FFE, 1993:26). A formulation which can lead to all sorts of abuses by individuals who, “sous le prétexte du droit de réponse, risquent de s’accaparer littéralement des colonnes des organes de presse dans le but d’atteindre d’autres objectifs (politiques, commerciaux ...)” (FFE, 1993:26). The law is such that the person concerned alone judges the appropriateness of the reply. He is not even expected to justify his allegations. A situation which makes the authors conclude that: “Le droit de réponse revêt donc un caractère général et absolu indépendamment du contenu de l’information qui le suscite” (FFE, 1993:26).

On public or state secrets, they note that apart from

defence secrets which benefit from a legal definition, “les notions de secret, de confidentialité sont en générale susceptibles de plusieurs appréciations” (FFE, 1993:24). But it must be borne in mind that “la confidentialité n’est pas nécessairement une interdiction de publication” (FFE, 1993:24). The role of the media as disseminators of information and moulders of public opinion “lui confèrent un droit d’information qui doit être protégé voire privilégié” (FFE, 1993:24-25). Because the administration can abuse the “confidential” seal, as many cases brought to court against the press attest, justice, in case of legal action, must prove its authority and privilege the public’s right to information and the journalist’s right to inform, and not “la rétention fallacieuse des informations par l’administration sous le couvert du sceau “CONFIDENTIEL” (FFE, 1993:25).

As Ebssiy Ngum shrewdly remarked, as long as journalists seek to satisfy the chief censors, they have no real interest in knowing the law. It is rather the chief censor who should use the press law because he is the one who determines what the public should read and what it should not read.⁹³

During a UNESCO seminar on ‘Le Cadre d’Exercice de la Liberté de Presse dans un Etat de Droit’, organised in Yaounde from September 6 to 10, 1993, other scholars, lawyers and media practitioners, inter alia, had an opportunity to critically examine the legal framework within which the Cameroonian journalist operates. In his paper⁹⁴ at the seminar, lawyer Francis G. N’Thepe criticised “le réflexe interventionniste de l’Etat Camerounais,” which devotes 35 of its 90 articles to repressive sanctions against the press. A repressive law compounded by other repressive measures “imposées de façon incontrôlable ou

⁹³ *Cameroon Post* N° 59, Wednesday February 27, 1991, p.12

⁹⁴ see Francis G. N’Thepe’s paper (1993) titled “Aspect Pratiques de la Loi relative à la Liberté de Communication Sociale”

presque par les pouvoirs publics” such as: a) the permanent or tacit refusal by public authorities of access to administrative documents for the journalists; b) the repeated seizures of newspapers decided upon without a notification in writing by the administration to the papers concerned; c) the repeated violation by the forces of law and order, acting without the authority of a judge, of newspaper offices and printing press premises; d) the banning of certain papers shortly before an electoral campaign; e) the arrogation to himself, by the Minister of Communication, the power to censor and suppress the media appearances of rival candidates during a presidential election campaign.

Simon Munzu, talking on the penal code and mass communication in a state of law⁹⁵, noted that the December 1990 law on Freedom of Mass Communication treats the journalists “comme des gens qui, tout le temps, ne cherchent qu’à porter atteinte aux intérêts de l’Etat ou des autres personnes”. He regrets the fact that neither the penal code nor the Freedom of Mass Communication law protects the journalist and the press:

“Aucune disposition protectrice de la presse n’est contenue dans le code pénal camerounais. Pour sa part, la loi N° 90/052 du 19 décembre 1990 relative à la liberté de communication sociale soumet à des multiples obligations non seulement les professionnels de la communication, mais aussi d’autres parties prenantes, notamment les autorités administratives et judiciaires. Pourtant, le chapitre X (article 60 à 73, inclus) de cette loi intitulé “Des infractions de la présente loi” se contente de ne réprimer

⁹⁵ see Simon Munzu’s paper (1993) titled “Le Droit Pénal et la Communication de Masse dans un Etat de Droit: Perspectives et Orientations”

que les manquements aux obligations faites à la presse” (Munzu, 1993:8).

Munzu is further struck by the fact that the law, although essentially repressive towards the press, devotes none of its articles to sanctioning administrative or judicial officials who fail in their duties to the law. As he puts it, “aucune disposition répressive de cette loi n’a pour cible le responsable administratif ou judiciaire qui manquerait à l’une ou l’autre des obligations auxquelles il est tenu aux termes de cette loi.” Among possible failures by administrative and judicial officials for which the law has not provided, Munzu includes: a) the official who acts in ignorance or in violation of the freedom of the printing press and the bookshop, the freedom of publication and distribution of news organs, the freedom of audiovisual communication and the freedom of access to administrative documents; b) the senior divisional officer who refuses to acknowledge by issuing a receipt the fact that someone desiring to start a newspaper has deposited his declaration to this effect; c) the judge who does not respect the deadline for cases contesting a decision to censor, seize or ban a paper; d) the minister in charge of the press who does not verify the circulation figures for every newspaper once in three months; e) the official responsible for regulating the press who fails to lay down the modalities for issuing and exploitation of licenses provided for in the law, or the criteria for determining who is a journalist, or the code of ethnics in journalism; f) the official who violates the law by issuing more than one license to an individual to create and run a private broadcasting enterprise; and g) the official who violates the law and proceeds to search or conduct seizures in newspaper offices or printing press premises without the expressed authorisation of a judge.

On the issue of responsibility for libel, Ewumbue-Monono

notes that “The law is silent on who is liable in cases of reproduced libellous material.” The law also fails to “state precisely whether the publisher and editor could be joint *tortfeasors* if they were not present on the day the libellous article was published. The problem of measuring responsibility for libel, too, has not taken into consideration the production process in each medium. [...] Section 74 of the 1990 law holds liable only publishers, editors, authors and printers. In the audiovisual media, it is the station manager, editor, and managers of recording or broadcasting companies. The technicians and producers who also participate in the news-making process are exempted. Moreover, the problem of whether the administrative authorities who censure or edit the publications should be arraigned ... was not resolved by the law” (Ewumbue-Monono, 1992:28). He equally notes that “the law is silent on other issues ... like plagiarism, obscene publication and seditious libel,” and “vague in its concept of “conflict with principles of public policy” expressed in Sections 14, 17 and 51” (Ewumbue-Monono, 1992:29).

Commenting on the law as well, Albert Mbida (1995) observes that at MINAT, the practice is to take newspapers intended for censorship to the assistant director for Political Affairs, who is also sub director for Public Freedoms. He criticises such concentration of censorship in the hands of one person and wonders just how possible it is for a single civil servant to read effectively, in time, all the newspapers produced or sold in Cameroon. As he puts it,

“Il n’est pas possible à un seul fonctionnaire de lire rapidement ces journaux avec parfois un recours obligé auprès de traducteurs pour les journaux italiens, grecs ou allemands et de permettre leur mise en vente ou en distribution dans les délais nécessaires à la fraîcheur de

l'information qui y est contenue.

En confiant les tâches de censure de tous ces journaux à un seul fonctionnaire ... qui doit par ailleurs remplir des tâches administratives, les autorités camerounaises ont certainement pensé que l'information n'était pas une denrée périssable et que "la censure ne constituait pas une urgence à leurs yeux" (Mbida, 1995:84-85).

In further criticism of the law in other aspects, Mbida notes that while the old law allowed for publishers to deposit their papers with the censor both at the office and at the home, during working or non-working hours, the new law simply states that newspapers must be deposited for censorship 4 hours before distribution. Something he considers "quelque peu maladroite," as it leaves some unanswered questions, namely:

"Faut-il comprendre que cette remise peut s'effectuer soit au bureau, soit au domicile? Si cette remise s'effectue au domicile peut-elle se faire à n'importe quelle heure? S'il s'agit d'un quotidien qui la plupart est bouclé dans la nuit, le Préfet acceptera-t-il de se réveiller tous les soirs pour lire les morasses ou le journal tiré? Si la remise a lieu au bureau, peut-elle se faire aux heures non ouvrables?" (Mbida, 1995:88).

Since the law does not specify that deposits are made during working hours, Mbida argues that this lacuna "peut permettre aux journaux de se passer de la censure sans éventuellement être inquiété si les journaux avaient de bons conseils juridiques" (Mbida, 1995:88). He illustrates his point thus:

“Prenons le cas d’un quotidien dont le directeur souhaite la diffusion à 7 heures du matin. Il lui suffirait après le tirage à 3h00 de venir déposer deux exemplaires à 5 heures du matin devant l’entrée du bureau du censeur, faire constater par un huissier et revenir à 7h01mn toujours accompagné de son huissier. Ce directeur aura sans nul doute respecté les termes de la loi, mais sans que son journal soit censuré” (Mbida, 1995:88-89).

(ii) The Law as interpreted by Government

Government does not share the above criticism of the 1990 Freedom of Communication law. The Minister of State for Communication⁹⁶ has described it as an “anthem on the freedom of expression,” to be counted amongst the most liberal in Africa. Addressing African experts at the first regional meeting of the International Programme for Communication Development in Africa (IPCD), in Yaounde on March 17, 1993, the minister dwelled on the “numerous innovations” brought about by the law: “the setting up of a newspaper has passed from a system of authorization to one of declaration: it guarantees journalists free access to all sources of information. Sources which are protected.” “Except in case of judicial inquiry and at the request of the state counsel, or on the authorization of the judge, the law forbids the searching of the premises used for the design, manufacture, production, printing and conservation of mass communication organs.” It opens broadcasting up to competition, thus bringing to an end the state monopoly by allowing for the setting up of private radio and TV stations.⁹⁷ With a law like that, the minister

^{96.} see *Cameroon Tribune*, N° 5341, jeudi 18 mars 1993, p.1-2; *La Messagère*, N° 016 du 23 mars 1993, p. 12-13

⁹⁷ Although the law, in principle, liberalises broadcasting,

affirmed, quoting President Paul Biya, no one needs any longer, in order “to express himself go underground, live in exile or abandon his family”. The fact that a multiplicity of titles were started in the private press soon after the law was passed, was interpreted by the minister as testimony to the liberal nature of the said law and of the New Deal government. As he told private press journalists shortly after its promulgation, the law marked the intensified democratisation of communication⁹⁸. All this was sufficient reason for the minister to believe that as far as the promotion of press freedom is concerned: “Cameroon and UNESCO are on the same wave length”. “Like UNESCO, Cameroon is convinced of the determining role of the press in spreading the freedoms of which our societies have a great need in order to pursue the democratic and socio-cultural transformations.”

But then, why the censorship? Why the raids by the forces of “law and order” in the premises of newspapers critical of government? Why the “militaro-police raids on kiosks and printing houses” reported by the critical private press⁹⁹ and by newspaper vendors? Why has Rotoprint, which prints most of

government is yet to set the criteria for the obtention of a franchise. A National Communications Council (NCC), provided for in the law, was created and became operational in February 1992. But as a consultative body whose creation is government’s initiative, the NCC could face a number of hurdles. It would have an uphill task inspiring credibility or proving its independence. In spite of the fact that members are elected, the appointment of certain officials by government would tend to check its desire to be totally independent. Even if it were given the free rein to exercise independence, no government is compelled to accept its proposals if these are seen to go against policy. It has consultative powers only, and cannot force the implementation of its decisions on any government.

⁹⁸ see *Cameroon Tribune*, Wednesday, January 16, 1991, N° 1099, p.3

⁹⁹ see *Challenge Nouveau* N° 017 du jeudi 21 au jeudi 28 janvier 1993, p. 5

the critical private papers in Douala, been under siege since May 11 1992¹⁰⁰? Why not allow, as provided for by the law, those who consider themselves falsely accused or wrongly treated by the press to take court action, instead of seizing, suspending or banning newspapers for “libel,” “insult,” or “contempt”? Why, in short, the contradiction of President Biya’s very own prescription that: “local newspapers should provide our population with more diversified information reported on various viewpoints and should lead to a free discussion of ideas which is one of the essential options of our policy of openness, democratization and liberalisation.”?¹⁰¹

The minister answers the first question at least: In order to ensure public order and good morals, the Cameroonian state “exercises a sort of legal control on the press, thanks to some legal measures providing for a censorship that is extremely light and symbolic”. For, “poorly managed, poorly used, freedom of expression can prove harmful to the consolidation of social balance and especially to national integration and peace”. Some papers, the minister stressed, do not respect the law, the professional code¹⁰² of conduct and the principle of objectivity,

¹⁰⁰ When *Le Messenger* (vol.II N° 018, Monday May 11, 1992) published an allegation that a Cameroonian presidential plane had been impounded in the USA for drug-trafficking and for the transportation of fake dollar notes, the government sent the forces of law and order to besiege the premises of Rotoprint in Douala in order to control, directly, the printing of critical private papers (see *Le Messenger* N° 262 du 14 mai 1992, *La Nouvelle Expression* N° 036 du 19-26 février 1992, *Challenge Hebdo* N° 70 du 19 mai 1992 and *La Messagère* N° 016 du 23 mars 1993, p. 13 for details).

¹⁰¹ quoted by Emmanuel Tataw, *Cameroon Tribune*, Friday December 14, 1990, N° 1080 P.2

¹⁰² Although Cameroonian journalists are yet to agree on one, by “respect de la déontologie professionnelle” Kontchou means that every journalist should be guided by the need “de restitution intégrale des faits, de respect du public, d’honnêteté, de vérification et de confrontation des sources” (*Cameroon Tribune* N° 4805 mercredi 16 janvier 1991, p.13).

impartiality and the search for truth dear to journalism. Censorship is thus necessary as a foil against those who would want to use freedom of expression as “a pretext to install intellectual terrorism and total anarchy or a sort of return to the state of savagery”.¹⁰³

According to the minister’s perspective every administrative measure taken against certain newspapers or journalists of the private press critical of government should be explained by the non-respect of laws and/or the professional code of conduct, even though Cameroonian journalists are yet to agree on a professional code as such. And it is precisely this explanation which has always been advanced each time the government has had to seize or suspend a paper.

Some examples: N° 008 of *La Nouvelle Expression* was seized and the paper suspended “for non-respect of the law”¹⁰⁴. On September 1 1991, the Minister of Information and Culture issued a press release confirming the suspension in August by MINAT of seven newspapers, namely *Le Messenger*, *Challenge Hebdo*, *La Nouvelle Expression*, *Galaxie*, *International News Bi-Hebdo*, *La Vision* and *La Messagère*, for the non-respect of the aspect of the law which obliges publishers to submit four copies of their papers to the Senior Divisional Officer, no less than four hours prior to distribution.¹⁰⁵ According to the said release, MINAT was merely respecting the law. The

¹⁰³ see *Cameroon Tribune*, N° 5341, jeudi 18 mars 1993, p.1-2

¹⁰⁴ see N° 009 07-15 mai 1991 for an editorial on the seizure of newspapers

¹⁰⁵ According to *La Messagère* (N° 001 Monday September 2, 1991, p.1), the order, “signed on August 12, 1991 ... did not only fail to state the reasons for the ban,” but the minister who issued it bypassed the papers to which the order was addressed. He sent it directly “to the governor of the Littoral Province who in turn simply informed *Le Messenger* of the ban order, several days after it had been issued.”

suspension, it said, would be lifted as soon as the papers were ready to respect the law. The press release was carried on CRTV radio, but not the reactions of the editors or publishers. Of the seven, five wrote for pardon while promising to respect the law, and were thus back in circulation before October 10 1991. Only Pius Njawe of *Le Messenger* and *La Messagère* insisted that he had always respected the law in question.¹⁰⁶ He waited until January 1992 to resume circulation.¹⁰⁷

This re-authorization was followed by a period of relative calm when the private press functioned with a minimum of administrative hostility. But from April 1992, censorship became severe once more. The editorial team of *Galaxie* was brought to court and sanctioned for publishing an article¹⁰⁸ that accused Andze Tsoungui of MINAT for having given the contract for ballot papers to his own firm and also, for having used, when he was Minister of Defence, military planes to transport pharmaceutical products for his son ¹⁰⁹. On July 6 1992, *Galaxie* was suspended for non-respect of the law ¹¹⁰. On

¹⁰⁶ see *La Messagère* (N° 001 Monday September 2, 1991, p.1) for his argument

¹⁰⁷ After the suspension, the government came under sustained national and international pressure. The radical opposition parties presented the lifting of the ban as a precondition for attending the tripartite talks in Yaounde. Such pressure was perhaps responsible for government's decision to allow *Le Messenger* and *La Messagère* resume publication without the written engagement to respect the law that MINAT had tabled as a precondition. See the first issue of *Le Messenger* (N° 001 Tuesday January 7, 1992, p.2; N° 242 du 06 janvier, 1992) following the lifting of the ban, for Pius Njawe's explanation why he stood his ground in the face of pressures by MINAT.

¹⁰⁸ see N° 27 of the paper

¹⁰⁹ see *Challenge Hebdo* N° 066 du 08 avril 1992, p. 4&5; USA Department of State, 1993:35; and *Galaxie* N° 31 du 17 mars 1992, p.1&3

¹¹⁰ see *La Nouvelle Expression (Spécial Solidarité Galaxie)* N° 000 du 28 au 03 août 1992; *Challenge Hebdo*, N° 78 du 15 juillet 1992, p.5). After selling the special edition in solidarity with *Galaxie*, critical newspaper editors and publishers met in Douala for a "remise du chèque spécial à Galaxie" (see *Le*

August 20 there was court action against *Le Messenger*, *Galaxie*, *L'Opinion* and *Dikalo* for “failure to submit copies to the legal authorities”. Between September 4 and 11, on the eve of the October 11 1992 presidential elections, the government again suspended *Le Messenger*, *La Nouvelle Expression*, and *Challenge Hebdo*.¹¹¹ According to *Conquettas*,¹¹² this gagging was not at all surprising or coincidental; for, on the eve of elections, “the private press must be gagged in order not to serve as mouthpiece” for the opposition. But this time the papers reacted by changing their appellations: *Galaxie*, *La Nouvelle Expression*, *Challenge Hebdo*, and *Le Messenger* became respectively *L'Ami du Peuple*, *L'Expression* (and later *Expression Nouvelle*), *Challenge Nouveau*¹¹³, and *La Messagère*. Then, they continued to publish and circulate in a clandestine manner. One of these papers had an interview even with the minister for Communication, albeit in suspension.¹¹⁴

Censorship and harassment of journalists was further intensified following proclamation of results of the presidential elections. The government clamped down on journalists and

Messenger N° 276 du 2 septembre 1992, p.7). This rare spirit of solidarity was born during the Monga-Le Messenger affair when 23 private press journalists met and wrote a memorandum in support of press freedom and solidarity (see *La Vision* N° 001 du 17 janvier 1991, p.7-8).

¹¹¹ see *La Messagère* N° 015 du 17 mars 1993, p. 7; *Le Messenger* (N° 273 du 13 août 1992, p.16; N° 276 du 2 septembre 1992, p.7 & and N° 278 du 16 septembre 1992, p.8)

¹¹² N° 004 du 08 au 23 septembre 1992, p. 2

¹¹³ When *Challenge Hebdo* became *Challenge Nouveau* and also created *Le Quotidien*, René Effa Belibi of the pro-government *Le Patriote* (N° 113 du 27 au 31 octobre 1992, p.13), talked of “Du Chantage Hebdo au Chantage Quotidien,” for as far as he was concerned, *Challenge Hebdo* and the others had specialised in cheating, defamation, provocation and defiance to government.

¹¹⁴ see *Challenge Nouveau* N° 027 du jeudi 01 au jeudi 08 avril 1993 pp. 1 & 8-9; and N° 028 du jeudi 08 au jeudi 15 avril 1993

papers that would not stop publishing articles protesting Biya's victory.¹¹⁵ Thereafter followed a brief period of calm, then signs of censorship resurfaced in the private press during the months of tension between Cameroon and Nigeria over the Bakassi Peninsula, but the articles censored were not always related to the dispute; for example, *Cameroon Post*¹¹⁶ carried a story censored (through blank lines across the article) titled: "Mr Biya Weds Again".

Apart from suspensions, there are also arrests and detention, one of the recent cases being that of Pius Njawe a day after he reprinted an article of *La Lettre du Continent* captioned: "While the economy dies ... 6 billions for the Mvomeka'a golf"¹¹⁷. The official reason for his arrest and detention as given by the acting state counsel Foe Jean-Claude Robert, was to find out how Njawe had come by a confidential document whose contents appeared in an article of *La Messagère*¹¹⁸ captioned: "Moutomé wants to incriminate Fru Ndi"¹¹⁹. Eventually, on August 17 1993, Pius Njawe of *Le Messager*, and Benjamin Zebaze and Martin Waffo of *Challenge Hebdo* were given suspended sentences of six and five months in prison respectively,¹²⁰ for publishing confidential material from the Ministry of Justice and Keeper of the Seals¹²¹. In January 1994 Ndzana Seme of *Le Nouvel Indépendant* was arrested and detained and his paper¹²² seized after publication

¹¹⁵ For a detailed account of victims of post-election government hostility towards the press, see Boh Herbert's November 10, 1992 report.

¹¹⁶ N° 0208 March 9-16 1994, p.3

¹¹⁷ see *La Messagère* N° 023 du 11 mai 1993, pp. 1 & 6

¹¹⁸ N° 021 du 26 avril 1993

¹¹⁹ see *La Messagère* N° 024 du 18 mai 1993, p. 16

¹²⁰ see *Challenge Bi-Hebdo* N° 104 du 20 août 1993, p. 2-3

¹²¹ see *Challenge Nouveau*, N° 030 du 22 au 29 avril 1993 and *La Messagère* N° 021 du 16 avril 1993

¹²² N° 15 du 6 janvier 1994

of an interview in which Joseph Owona, then secretary general at the Presidency, was alleged to have vowed that never will a Bamileke be president in Cameroon. Again, after publication of an article in the October 12, 1994 edition of *Le Nouvel Indépendant*, allegedly accusing the Head of State of having betrayed the nation, Ndzana Seme was arrested and taken to the Kondengui Prison.

However, the most common form of sanctions are seizures, examples of which include: N° 209 du 27 décembre 1990 *Le Messager* which contained an open letter to President Biya by Célestin Monga titled “La Démocratie Truquée”(“Doctored Democracy”)¹²³; N° 222 du 03 avril 1991 of *Le Messager* that carried a dossier on financial mismanagement at the Advanced School of Mass Communication (ASMAC/ESSTI)¹²⁴; N° 229 du 23 mai 1991

¹²³ The much heralded dawn of freedom for the press was put to the test immediately by the trial of Célestin Monga and *Le Messager* in Douala, charged under sections 153 and 154 of the new penal code, for contempt on the person of the President of the Republic and on public bodies and public servants. In the letter Célestin Monga questioned President Biya’s “presumptuous and triumphalist” claim of having brought democracy to Cameroonians, and accused him of being responsible for most of Cameroon’s political and economic failures. He also charged the judiciary for inefficiency and corruption and condemned the legislature of lacking any real powers to initiate laws and of being crippled by the illiteracy of most of its members.

In the trial that followed in Douala (see *Le Messager* N° 016 Thursday January 24, 1991 for details) Célestin Monga and Pius Njawe were found guilty on charges of contempt against the National Assembly and the Judiciary, and sentenced to six months suspended sentence for three years - a verdict announced by two CRTV journalists, Jean Atangana and Thomas Babi Koussana, several hours before the presiding magistrate could actually deliver the judgment in court. (For a profound analysis from different perspectives, of the Monga-Le Messager affair, see *Gazette* N° 647 du mercredi 23 janvier, 1991.)

¹²⁴ This report accused the Director of ESSTI, Dr Jacques Fame

of *Le Messenger* which talked of the official report of “No Death” at the University of Yaounde and of the government’s war logic¹²⁵; N° 231 du 06 juin 1991 and N° 233 du 20 juin 1991 of *Le Messenger* which alleged that President Biya had armed a certain Ebalé Angounou to eliminate some members of the opposition¹²⁶; N° 232 du 12 juin 1991 *Le Messenger Spécial*

Ndongo, of embezzling the sum of FCFA 400 million. The accusation was made in a confidential report addressed to the President of the Republic by the school’s stores accountant Mr. Ngandi Belinga Fidèle. The detailed report documented the misappropriation of funds since 1982. It accused the Director and Secretary General of systematically enriching themselves from school funds (see *Cameroon Post* N° 64, April 6-11, 1991 for further developments on the affair).

¹²⁵ In March and April 1991 students of Yaounde University went on strike. In addition to highlighting their academic and social grievances, was the call for government to yield to the holding of a sovereign national conference. Troops were sent to the university campus and student residential areas in the neighbourhood to quell the strike. The private press accused the military of savage repression, rape and other excesses. It was even alleged that many students, mostly Anglophones and Bamileke (“Anglo-Bamis”) were missing, and that 58 of them were feared killed and secretly buried in mass graves around the River Sanaga on the road to Bafia.

The government, through its Minister of Information and Culture, Augustin Kontchou Kuoumegni, claimed that there had been no deaths - hence the famous nickname of “ZERO MORT” by which the minister came to be known thereafter. It was also alleged that the government was secretly financing and arming a group of pro-establishment students known as “Auto-Défense,” to foil the moves of the others, “le Parlement,” whom the government was convinced were being instigated by the radical opposition. (For more on the strike and reports on rising ethnic tension between the Beti and other ethnic groups, the “Anglo-Bamis” most especially, see *Cameroon Post* (N° 66, Thursday April 18 - 25, 1991, p.1; N° 67, Thursday April 25 - May 2, 1991; N° 69 Thursday May 9-16, 1991, p.1; N° 70 Wednesday May 15-22, 1991 p.4; N° 73 Thursday June 6-13, 1991, p.1; N° 80 Monday August 19-26 1991, p.14; N° 81 Monday August 26 September 2, 1991, p.1), *Le Messenger* (N° 025 Monday May 6, 1991, p.1), *Le Courrier* (N° 011 August 1-8, 1991), and *Cameroon Life* (vol.1 N° 9 May 1991, p.16-17).

¹²⁶ see *Cameroon Tribune* N° 4898, lundi 3 juin 1991, p.5 for

which published an opinion poll on voting intentions and party political popularity, and which contained a political map of Cameroon and a critical interview with François Sengat Kuoh, former secretary general of the CPDM; N° 0031 du 08-15 mai 1991 of *Challenge Hebdo* which carried an interview with Célestin Monga, and talked about the ‘progressive wing’ of the CPDM created by J.J. Ekindi¹²⁷; N° 0036 du 12 au 19 juin 1991 of *Challenge Hebdo* bearing an article titled: “Nsimalen International Airport: Delusion of Grandeur,” and a questionnaire of an opinion poll captioned: “How do you evaluate Paul Biya the President of the Republic?”¹²⁸; N° 038, 041 and 042, 1991 of

government’s refutal of a letter allegedly signed by Paul Biya authorising “his young friend” to carry a gun.

¹²⁷ For an example of how much Ekindi was an embarrassment to the CPDM, see his speech or reports on it (*Le Messenger* (English) N° 021 Monday March 25, 1991, p.1) at the opening of a three day congress of the Wouri Section of the party on Thursday March 14, 1991. The article says that particular speech “could not be broadcast because of an embargo by CRTV General Manager” who found it “subversive”. In October 1990, the Governor of the Littoral Province, Luc Loe, had prevented Ekindi from holding the section conference when he censored the speech Ekindi had prepared to deliver on the occasion. That very May of the seizure Ekindi resigned from the CPDM. In August, he founded his own party, Mouvement Progrèssiste (MP) and was candidate at the October 1992 presidential elections, during the campaigns for which his declarations on TV were once again censored “two days before the end of the campaign, for not respecting legal provisions” (Ministry of Communication, 1993:66).

¹²⁸ This opinion poll was intended as a follow-up to that of March 6, conducted by the same paper on the level of popularity of members of government. Shortly after the poll which concluded that 76% of Biya’s government was unpopular, it was reported (*Le Messenger* N° 023 Tuesday April 16, 1991, p.5; *Challenge Hebdo* N° 0031 du 08 au 15 mai, 1991, p.6) that the Ministry of Information and Culture planned “to create an official opinion polls agency to preempt and eventually control all opinion polls published by private institutions and newspapers.” The poll was denounced for being unscientific and poorly conducted by CRTV, *Cameroon Tribune* and *Le Patriote*, and also by Nga Ndong (1993:145-149), who argues that these polls were deliberately aimed at misleading public opinion. *Challenge Hebdo*

La Nouvelle Expression for publishing stories on: “What will happen after the March 1 elections,” “Election Rigging: Proofs of fraud in the Mbam,” and “The Police on the point of an uprising” respectively; N° 048 spécial du 04-11 mai 1992 of *La Nouvelle Expression* which reprinted an interview given *Jeune Afrique Economie*¹²⁹ by Messi Messi, ex-general manager of the defunct Société Camerounaise de Banque (SCB), in which he accused Mr and Mrs Biya of having contributed in no small way to the bankruptcy of the bank; N° 058 du 14 au 20 juillet 1992 of *La Nouvelle Expression* carrying yet another dossier on the “Messi Messi Affair” and further evidence implicating the presidential couple¹³⁰; and N° 147 du 17 février 1994 of *Challenge Hebdo* carrying an interview with Ebale Angounou, the man allegedly armed by President Biya to kill strategic members of the opposition.

reacted by seeking to justify its method and to prove its knowledgeability in the domain of opinion polls (see N° 0023 du 13 au 19 mars 1991, p.8-9; N° 0052 du 18 au 26 décembre 1991, p.7-10).

¹²⁹ N° 155 de mai 1992

¹³⁰ In what was considered to be the scandal of the year, *Jeune Afrique Economie* (N° 155 mai 1992) published an interview granted by Messi Messi, former Director of the defunct SCB, in which he seriously implicated Mrs and Mr Biya as having contributed immensely to the bankruptcy of the bank. When the magazine was disallowed circulation in Cameroon, three local newspapers ran the same interview. But only *La Nouvelle Expression* (N° 048 Spécial du 04 au 11 mai 1992) was banned, perhaps because it also published in French the original letters found in the disallowed *Jeune Afrique Economie*. *International News Hebdo*, which carried only the interview, was not banned. So was *Cameroon Post* (N° 109 May 6-13, 1992) which ran the same story and details in English. In any case, *La Nouvelle Expression* headlines were quite dramatic: “Enfin la vérité sur la faillite de l'ex-SCB: Messi Messi crucifie Mme Biya. *Plus de 3 milliards détournés par le couple présidentiel et la famille *Des centaines de millions empochés par Asso'o Emane et Edzoa Titus. L'ancien DG vient de tout déballer à Jeune Afrique Economie au cours d'un entretien avec Célestin Monga. Interview et documents qui accablent Jeanne-Irène et Paul Biya.”

Amougou reports from his study of official documents at MINAT that between 1991 and 1993, a total of 144 issues of different newspapers were seized for reasons of “public order”. Of this number, 27 issues of 13 different newspapers were seized in 1991 (Table 2); 68 issues of 27 newspapers, including *Jeune Afrique Economie*,¹³¹ were seized in 1992 (Table 3); and 49 issues of 15 different national newspapers and 1 foreign publication, the French daily *Libération*¹³² were seized in 1993 (Table 4). According to Amougou, the “inflated” number of seizures in 1992 is sufficient demonstration “que la presse écrite est une cible voire un champ d’application privilégié de l’ordre public lorsque le Gouvernement annonce et applique sa stratégie visant à restaurer l’autorité de l’Etat,” and also of government’s preoccupation with public order before, during and after the presidential elections of October 11, 1992 (Amougou, 1994:164-167).

¹³¹ N° 155 de mai 1992

¹³² N° 3764

TABLE 2: 1991: Breakdown of Newspapers seized

	DENOMINATION DU JOURNAL	NOMBRE DE FOIS SAISI
1	LE MESSAGER	9
2	LA NOUVELLE EXPRESSION	6
3	CHALLENGE HEBDO	2
4	LA DETENTE	1
5	CAMEROON POST	1
6	GALAXIE	1
7	HORIZONS	1
8	INTERNATIONAL N:HEBDO	1
9	L'AUREORE	1
10	LE FUTURE POLITIQUE	1
11	LE JOURNAL DE L'AFRIQUE	1
12	LA VISION	1
13	L'OPINION	1

Source: Amougou, 1994:164

TABLE 3: 1992: Breakdown of Newspapers Seized

	DENOMINATION DU JOURNAL	NOMBRE DE FOIS SAISI
1	LA NOUVELLE EXPRESSION	9
2	LE MESSENGER	7
3	LA VISION	7
4	CHALLENGE HEBDO	5
5	GALAXIE	5
6	L'EXPRESSION	4
7	LA DETENTE	3
8	DIKALO	3
9	CAMEROON POST	2
10	CHALLENGE NOUVEAU	2
11	GALAXIE MEDIA	2
12	INTERNATIONAL N.HEBDO	2
13	OBJECTIF (UPC- MANIDEM)	2
14	LE QUOTIDIEN	2
15	FASCICULE (LE MESSENGER)	1
16	FRATERNITE	1
17	JEUNE AFRIQUE ECONOMIE	1
18	L'AMI DU PEUPLE	1
19	LA NOUVELLE REPUBLIQUE	1
20	LA PRESSE	1

21	LE GLOBE	1
22	LE MOUSTIQUE DECHAINE	1
23	LETTRE DU CANTON	1
24	LE TEMPS	1
25	L'OPINION	1
26	OASIS	1
27	THE SKETCH	1

Source: Amougou, 1994:165-166

TABLE 3: 1992: Breakdown of Newspapers Seized

	DENOMINATION DU JOURNAL	NOMBRE DE FOIS SAISI
1	LA NOUVELLE EXPRESSION	9
2	GALAXIE	8
3	LE MESSAGER POPOLI	5
4	THE HERALD	5
5	CAMEROON POST	4
6	LE MESSAGER	4
7	LE NOUVEL INDEPENDANT	4
8	CHALLENGE (MENSUEL ET BI HEBDO)	2
9	FORCE OUVRIERE	1
10	LA DETENTE	1
11	LA NATIONALE	1

12	LA SENTINELLE	1
13	LIBERATION	1
14	OCCALIP INFO	1
15	OUR PEOPLE	1
16	POST WATCH	1

Source: Amougou, 1994:167

(iii) The Law as Interpreted by the Press

The newspapers on their part do not share the government's interpretation of the law. They claim that they have always respected the law which gives them two distinct options of censorship: According to section 14 of law N° 019/052 of December 19, 1990:

“Each press organ shall be bound to submit copies to the administrative authorities.

In this regard, the publisher shall be bound to submit to the Senior Divisional Officer, no less than four hours prior to distribution, two copies or two brush-proofs signed by him.

The four-hour time-limit shall be reduced to two hours for daily newspapers.

The same shall be submitted to the Ministry in charge of Territorial Administration as concerns Mfoundi Division and to the Governor's Office as concerns the other divisions in which provincial headquarters are located.

The Newspaper issues thus submitted may be censored in whole or in part where there is a conflict with the principles of public policy.

The censorship decision may be appealed against before a competent magistrate who must make a ruling

within one month following the date he is seized of the matter” (SOPECAM, 1991:34).

The first option implies that the publishers of newspapers can only print after administrative approval by MINAT. The second option permits them to proceed with printing, submit copies for censorship and wait for four or two hours, after which if there is no reaction from MINAT, they can make their papers available for circulation. The papers suspended or simply seized are those which opted for the second alternative, which must have embarrassed the government.¹³³ If the government’s preoccupation was to guarantee selective communication and information control, to stop the press from serving as the power of the powerless, as one deduce from its actions, this second option would be a serious error of judgement on its part. A loophole perhaps explained by the fact that the law “was hurriedly drawn up” to meet a political agenda designed to calm “the tempers which rose with the clamour for democratic reforms” (Ewumbue-Monono,

^{133.} Responding to questions by Ponus and Zebaze following seizure of N° 209 of *Le Messager* (see *Challenge Hebdo*, N° 014 du 03 au 09 janvier 1991, p.7), Emmanuel Noubissie Ngankam, then journalist with the paper, had this to say, among other things:

Ce qu’il y a de ridicule c’est que le journal est passé par la censure. Quand bien même la lettre de Célestin MONGA aurait été “diffamatoire, et injurieuse” vis-à-vis du président de la République, le journal est passé par la censure. Nous avons respecté les délais réglementaires. Le jeudi 27, le journal a été déposé à la censure à 9 heures du matin. A 14h30, nous n’avions toujours pas eu le visa de la censure, à 15h30 non plus. Le journal n’a été mis en vente qu’à 16h20. Entre 9h et 16h30 il s’est écoulé une durée de plus de 6 heures de temps. Alors que les textes prévoient 4 heures. Donc de là à se demander qui est-ce qui a violé la loi. Je me pose la question de savoir si c’est nous ou l’Administration Territoriale...

1992:29).

The victimised newspapers also complain of the fact that they are “often censored for ‘libel’, ‘insult’, ‘contempt’, etc ... all of which are offenses condemned by other legal measures, while the framework provided by this law for the practice of censorship is unequivocal: ‘public order and good morals’”¹³⁴.

According to Ponus of *Challenge Hebdo*¹³⁵, the government must bear the consequences of a law poorly thought out. He writes: “You must suffer the consequences of the law you made yourself”. But instead of doing that, the government, “stuck,” embarked on a selective application of the law “without any shame”. To him, it is not the private papers that are to blame for non-respect of the law; for this law is “today ridiculed by the very people who made it”. An opinion which can hardly be proved wrong by the Minister of Territorial Administration, Andze Tsoungui, if we take into account his declaration that “laws are made by men for men” and that “one must not stick to the letter” of the law¹³⁶. Such a selective interpretation of the law is what made lawyer Francis G. N’Thepe (1993) comment that “les lois ne sont en fait que ce que les hommes souhaitent qu’elles soient et que même les meilleures lois ne sont utiles et efficaces que si elles sont respectées par tous”.

To Ponus, if the government had to let the law be applied strictly, the private press would never be accused of non-respect. He explains himself thus:

“... if the December 1990 law on freedom of mass communication was poorly thought out and poorly written, newspaper publishers are not to blame.

¹³⁴ Pius N. Njawe, *La Messagère*, N° 016 du 23 mars 1993, p. 13

¹³⁵ N° 070 du 19 mai 1992, p. 2

¹³⁶ see *Cameroon Tribune*, N° 5075 jeudi 20 février, 1992, p. 10

Section 14 ... does not make clear (out of forgetfulness?) if the four hours in question are working hours or not. It does not even make clear if once the dummies or the copies have been submitted, the newspaper publisher is bound to come back for them in order to have an idea on what has been decided. Which implies that it is, without doubt, up to the administration to do everything to bring its decision to the knowledge of the publisher and this notification has to be given within four hours following submission.

Hence, a publisher who makes his compulsory submission of two copies at 8 am, can place his paper in the market at 12:01 pm if by then he still has not received any notification from the censor. And in this case, all seizures would be illegal.

In the same way, when the administrative submission is made at 5:45 pm, the paper can, following the same conditions, be placed in the market at 9:46 pm, without any evil intention to disrespect the law.

It is this second option (post-impression censorship) that the majority of private newspapers habitually use and which some "authorities" consider, wrongly, as acting illegally. [...]"

It must be said that by interpreting the law thus, the critical private press has made the censor's work quite difficult, who, in such conditions, finds himself with very little time to do it effectively. This is especially the case in Douala where the majority of private newspapers are based. This can give rise to arbitrary conduct on the part of the censor, which could work in disfavour of the papers in question.¹³⁷ As Erik Essoussie (a

¹³⁷

According to François Aby Donfack, editor-in-chief of *Challenge Hebdo* (interviewed 26 & 27 April, 1994), the censor in Douala does everything to break any sign of solidarity in the press. Using the example of the suspension of N° 147 du 17 février 1994 of his paper, he said:

censor with over eight years' experience and deputy director in charge of political affairs at MINAT) confessed, before 1991 he even used to correct grammatical and spelling mistakes in the papers brought to him for censorship, but the multiplication of titles and the lack of time soon made it impossible for him to continue with such benevolent work.¹³⁸

The law has given the censor so much leeway that he virtually substitutes the real editors of the critical private press, as he obliges them to conform to inconsistencies on the part of government and to a particular interpretation of the law.¹³⁹ The censor's right to edit even newspaper stories already mounted on dummies, and to prescribe which words are to be used in the process, makes him an "editor" more powerful than the publisher of the paper. His lacking in training as journalist does not seem to temper his zeal to decide what is publishable. Thus certain contradictions that have attracted much criticism: such as when the censor turns down a story in Douala that is accepted for publication in Yaounde, or when the same censor approves that a newspaper should circulate and later turns round to order the same newspaper to be confiscated and the editor and sometimes even the publisher detained.

The private press and critical public have hardly really

"... the local press was not free to talk about it. [...] At first we were surprised that other papers had done nothing on our behalf, but after investigations we realised that they had indeed written against the suspension, but that censorship had not allowed their reactions to be published. We have the ill-luck of being mostly Douala-based papers. The censor, chief of cabinet for the Governor of Littoral, who was behind our suspension, is the same fellow charged with censoring the other papers. He cannot, in his opinion, tolerate the publication of unpleasant things about himself."

¹³⁸ interviewed by Gallagher, 13 May, 1991

¹³⁹ see letter to Andze Tsoungui by *Challenge Hebdo* (N° 037 du 19 au 26 juin 1991, p.6), complaining against the highhandedness of a Douala censor, Mr Mbozo'o.

understood what criteria the censor uses to decide what is fit for which reader's mind. They refuse to accept that the censor is eligible to conduct a palatability test to decide on public consumption. They would like the editors to be able to censor their publications themselves, as is the case in most countries, and be charged in a free and fair court if they offend anyone in the exercise of their duty.

Thus embarrassed by a law poorly thought out, the administration, according to Pius Njawe,¹⁴⁰

“... often imposes on editors the first option which gives the censor the latitude to butcher at will. And it is for having refused to submit themselves to this way of doing that most papers saw themselves rejected at the services competent in censorship. And when they were placed for sale four hours after the bailiff had taken note of the refusal by the censor to examine them according to the law, they were victims of systematic seizures, followed by suspension.”

By besieging Rotoprint, which prints most of the private press, François Aby Donfack¹⁴¹ argues, the Governor of the Littoral Province made much easier his task of imposing on the press his preferred form of censorship. According to Donfack, the option of depositing for censorship already printed copies of the newspaper, “is no longer possible”. Since May 11, 1992, the police are implanted at the entrance of Rotoprint. They monitor all movement, and “it is no longer possible to take a newspaper out of the premises without showing them the OK of the censor.” After Rotoprint has parcelled the papers, at the exit the police unbundles the papers, takes a copy and

¹⁴⁰ *La Messagère*, N° 016 du 23 mars 1993, p. 13

¹⁴¹ interviewed 26&27/4/94

compares it with a copy of the dummy stamped OK. Only after satisfying themselves that the changes recommended by the censor have been duly effected, does the police allow the editor to leave with his consignment. "The police know the stamp of the censor very well, and should it not be OK the entire consignment is taken for destruction at the GMI." In the face of this and with increasing economic hardship, every editor is bound to think twice before taking the risk of submitting his paper for censorship only after printing it. As François Aby Donfack remarks, "it is true that one can print the paper and take copies to the censor. But there is the risk that after printing 20,000 copies for about FCFA 1.5 million, you are told by the censor to delete a phrase, and all the 20,000 copies have to be destroyed and reprinted without the phrase in question."¹⁴² Although his is an extreme example, it nevertheless highlights the enormous risk for the editor of making full use of the law.

Such economic risks as described by François Aby Donfack, were compounded by the devaluation in January 1994 of the Franc CFA and by a 40% rise in the cost of newsprint in January 1995. The papers reacted by raising their prices by 50% - from FCFA 150 to FCFA 250 and from FCFA 200 to FCFA 300 respectively. This meant that even fewer Cameroonians than before were going to afford newspapers any more. Indeed, very few Cameroonians were going to read newspapers, for Rotoprint, in February 1995, devised a strategy of clipping together the pages of each newspaper copy, in order to curb the rampant practice of vendors renting papers out or readers flipping through them at kiosks. The casualties among the papers are bound to be great - many are simply going to fold up or close down; and the economic crisis and devaluation

¹⁴² for more of the same argument, see *Challenge Hebdo* N° 0037 du 19 au 26 juin 1991, p.6

would have succeeded where the MINAT' censor and SOPECAM did not quite succeed - stifle the government's most determined critic, the critical private press.

Keye Ndogo¹⁴³ argues that this is happening already. Papers such as *Le Messenger* and *La Nouvelle Expression* which between 1990 and 1992, "la période la plus fastueuse," had a regular circulation figure of 80,000 and 70,000 respectively, with *Le Messenger* even attaining a record of 125,000 at one point, have seen their circulation figures plummet to between 15,000 and 20,000 copies. The private press, which could boast of over 20 regular titles "à ses heures de gloire," can today hardly account for more than 10 regular titles. Although to Keye Ndogo the reasons are public apathy with a highly politicised and tribalised press which between 1990 and 1992 contented itself less with professional considerations than with "des révélations de scandales politico-financiers dont le public semblait se régaler," one must, as Pius Njawe¹⁴⁴ notes in his reply to Keye Ndogo, take into consideration as well other factors, amongst which, the fall in the purchasing power of Cameroonian workers, most of whom "ont perdu entre 70 et 65% de leurs salaires en janvier et novembre 1993," and the devaluation has led to "la hausse du prix du papier journal sur le marché international" and forced "les éditeurs camerounais à revoir à la hausse le prix de vente de leurs journaux".

Back to censorship, Ponus argues that, cornered by its own "defective" law, the administration, whenever the private press has made full use of the law,

"... coldly declares to everyone who wants to listen that

¹⁴³ see his article in *Jeune Afrique* (N° 1781 du 23 février au 1er mars 1995, p.64-65)

¹⁴⁴ see Njawe's article in *Jeune Afrique* (N° 1788 du 13 au 19 avril 1995, p.18-19)

the private newspapers do not respect the law in place. A sufficient reason to treat them as vulgar vandals and to attribute to them all shameful illnesses, simply because they are afraid to be denounced, afraid of an informed public.”

This argument makes sense if one observes, that despite the fact that most journalists of the private press are not professionally trained, only newspapers that oppose the government are regularly accused of non-respect of the law, of lack of a professional code of conduct, of intoxication, of inciting to revolt and of being noxious to national integration and to peace. The pro-government private papers such as *Le Patriote*, *Le Témoin*, *La Caravane*, *Lettre du Cameroun*, *Nouvelle du Cameroun*, and *Cent Rires* have experienced neither censorship, seizure, nor suspension. We could, as a reminder, quote the former minister of MINAT, Jean Marcel Mengueme, who in the 1980s exempted *Cameroon Tribune* from pre-printing censorship simply because this paper had always done as expected by government (Nji, 1985:81; Nyamnjoh, 1990:63). Which seems to imply that “public order and good morals” can only be violated or endangered by a press critical of government.

Yet, a cursory overview of the contents of the pro-government papers shows that they are far from being without polemics or intoxication¹⁴⁵; they respect the professional code of conduct neither. As an example, *Le Patriote*¹⁴⁶ published a supposed interview it had with Mongo Beti, in which the latter: “Demolishes Mrs Frances Cook [US ambassador] and denounces his ‘friends’ of the LAAKAM” [bamiléké elite association]; but it is an interview which Mongo Beti did not

¹⁴⁵ see Guiffo (1993) and Nga Ndongo (1993) for the case of *Le Patriote*

¹⁴⁶ N° 116 du 10 au 16 décembre 1992, pp. 8-9

recognise, judging from his declarations shortly after the publication.¹⁴⁷ Already, well before then, the same *Le Patriote*¹⁴⁸ had published a letter purportedly written by the elite of Metta in the North-West Province to John Fru Ndi, in which they declared: “Nous devons dominer toutes les tribus du Cameroun”; and a supposed “diabolical plan” by the SDF with as aim: “To do everything to bring about the collective resignation of all cabinet ministers”; “To lead in this way President Biya to resign or to convene a sovereign national conference”; “To chase all Bamilekes out of the North-West”; and “To abolish all traditional chiefdoms”.

An obvious argument is that, if similar articles are not tolerated in newspapers critical of government which condemns intoxication or the endangerment of national integration and peace, why make an exception of pro-government papers? The reason is that the government is comfortable with the tendency in these papers to paint it in lustrous colours, even when its political and economic performance is dismal. National unity and integration thus become ideals that can only be attained by government and its supporters. Everyone who differs from government in perspective and action, according to this logic, is certainly working against national unity and integration.

All the papers suspended in 1991, 1992 and subsequently, as well as all other victims of what Minister Kontchou described as an “*extremely light and symbolic censorship*,” share this way of interpreting the law. In a series of articles captioned: “Dossier Independent Press: Serious attacks on press freedom

¹⁴⁷ see *Fraternité* N° 010 du décembre 1992, pp. 1-3; *Expression Nouvelle* N° 004 du décembre 1992, p.16

¹⁴⁸ N° 75 du 28 juin 1991, p. 1&4-7; N° 108 du 20 au 26 août 1992 - see pp. 1 & 3-6

under a fascist regime,” *La Messagère*¹⁴⁹, in 1993, accused the Biya government of wanting “to suffocate the independent press at all cost” since the advent of multipartyism. In one of these articles, Eyoum Ngangue described the critical private press as victim of denigrating language by government, the official media, and the pro-government private press. Terms such as “opposition press,” “rag,” “a certain press” and “gutter press,” are frequently used. Still according to Eyoum Ngangue, the official press misses no occasion to accuse them of: “lack of professionalism, of intoxication, of supporting to opposition parties, of criticising government action for the sake of criticism” Which seems to belie the affirmation by Pius Njawe that this so-called “independent press” is critical both of the government and the opposition, and in effect plays the important role of “the veritable opposition as opposed to the formal opposition”¹⁵⁰. This press is denied access to official information and to administrative authorities. Specialised services, he claims, sometimes deliberately make available to the press “faked” documents in view of incriminating or making fools of the papers that are going to use them.

One should however add that although denied formal access to official information, the private press is being constantly used by government officials to settle scores with one another, or, for those sympathetic with the opposition, to embarrass the government. This accounts for the many political and financial scandals revealed in the private press since 1990, often with copies of confidential documents in support.

While formal access is denied the critical private press to official information, the government and groups close to the

¹⁴⁹ N° 015 du 17 mars 1993, pp. 1& 6 - 12

¹⁵⁰ see J. T. Sankarah, *Challenge Nouveau*, N° 15 du jeudi 14 au jeudi 21 janvier 1993, p. 5

government finance a certain number of “private” newspapers (e.g. *Le Patriote* and *Le Témoin*) which have as mission to misinform the public and discredit the critical private press. Still according to Eyoum Ngangue, the situation of the critical private press got worse after the October 1992 presidential elections:

“Certain newspapers had the impertinence to relate the severe cases of electoral fraud, to denounce the usurpation of a victory, to ‘refuse to accept’ the false verdict by Dipanda Mouelle: they chose to side with truth, to side with the people. Since then the plight has only got more infernal. It is true that the suspension of September 4 *was intended to exclude a part of the Cameroonian opposition who think differently from the Etoudi dictator and his clique of ‘ventrocrates’ [governed by the belly] in order to have only one bell in the country, as if CRTV, Cameroon Tribune and the official private press were doing nothing. [...]*”¹⁵¹

The only crime of the critical private press, Eyoum Ngangue pursues, was to have refused to yield to force, succumb to state violence, or concede to all those who have betrayed the people.¹⁵² Their crime, according to Hilary Kebila Fokum, is their refusal to see anything “wrong in hauling verbal grenades at an inefficient regime, where corruption has seeped into every orifice and ventricle.”¹⁵³

They see this as tactics or strategies to render the private press harmless to those in power. In the words of Hilary Kebila Fokum¹⁵⁴, “to better violate human rights without any qualms,

¹⁵¹ *La Messagère* N° 015 du 17 mars 1993, p. 7

¹⁵² *La Messagère* N° 015 du 17 mars 1993, p. 7

¹⁵³ *La Messagère* N° 001 Monday September 2, 1991, P.14

¹⁵⁴ *La Messagère* N° 001 Monday September 2, 1991, P.14

to enhance cosmetic democracy through fake multipartyism, to better misinform and misinform Cameroonians,” the government must put to sleep the critical private press. Thus a cartoon of the Minister of Communication saying: “The New Deal Government will fight to the end this press which wants to know what the Head of State does at midnight, under his sheets!!”¹⁵⁵

In its fight against the above forms of administrative censorship, the private press has often found ready allies in such external pressure groups as Reporters sans Frontières¹⁵⁶ and the New York-based “Committee to Protect Journalists”. The single most important recognition of the predicament of the Cameroonian press in the face of sustained administrative censorship and harassment was the award, to Pius Njawe, of the “Plume d’Or” 1993 by the “Fédération Internationale des Editeurs de Journaux” (FIEJ).¹⁵⁷ Chosen for the award by a committee of newspaper editors from over 40 countries, the FIEJ praised Njawe for being a real hero of the fight for press freedom. To the FIEJ, Njawe had demonstrated courage, determination and ingenuity to ensure continuous publication of his paper. In its declaration, the FIEJ accused the Cameroonian government of having employed “tout un arsenal de mesures de répression dans ses efforts pour réduire au silence *Le Messager*: censure, saisie du journal, ordres de suspension, mais aussi arrestations et poursuites judiciaires

¹⁵⁵ *La Messagère* N° 016 du 23 mars 1993, p. 12

¹⁵⁶ Of which Pius Njawe of *Le Messager* is the African representative (see *Challenge Hebdo* N° 062 du 04 au 11 mars 1992, p.14); a fact which explains the promptitude, precision and sense of detail characteristic of the organisation’s press releases or letters of protest against acts of censorship (seizures, bans, suspensions) and harassment of journalists in Cameroon.

¹⁵⁷ Other awards include the “Prix de la Liberté de la Presse” by the Committee to Protect Journalists, which he received on October 23, 1991 in New York (*Le Messager* N° 271 17 juillet 1992, p.13).

contre M. Njawe, les distributeurs du journal et les membres de son équipe.” The fact that Njawe had fled Cameroon for fear of his life, was used by FIEJ as further evidence against the intolerance of the Cameroonian authorities.¹⁵⁸ The newspapers rejoiced whenever the authorities were undiplomatic enough as to deny entry visas to foreigners concerned with press harassment in Cameroon.¹⁵⁹

This turbulent government-private press relationship, even after the December 1990 law on Communications, whose supposed liberal nature government has repeatedly stressed, only further highlights the administration’s impatience with alternative interpretations and its distaste for critical publications. President Biya has never granted an interview to any of the private papers in Cameroon. The private press does not have formal access to coverage of daily activities at the presidency of the republic, which is reserved for CRTV and *Cameroon Tribune* only. The official media and foreign publications and radios are President Biya’s privileged channels for addressing Cameroonians on issues pertaining to Cameroon. After the President’s CRTV chit-chat with Eric Chinje on April 11 1991, Rotcod Gobata, dissatisfied with the “uncritical” questions the President had been asked, came up with questions of his own, among which was the following on the President’s relationship with the Cameroonian press:

“Excellency you are always so bold when you go to

¹⁵⁸ *La Messagère* N° 010 du 8 février, 1993 p.10

¹⁵⁹ A case in point is Mr Prescott Low, president of the International Federation of Newspaper Editors, who, according to *La Messagère* (N° 09 1 février, 1993, p.7), in January 1993 “s’est vu refuser un visa d’entrée au Cameroun pour enquêter sur les atteintes du gouvernement contre la liberté de la presse.”

France that you can face the press and answer a barrage of questions on sensitive issues. Why does your boldness and self-confidence seem to desert you immediately you get back here (your own proper kingdom) so that you dare not face the Cameroonian press in like manner? Don't you think this arrangement whereby you sit down alone with me [Eric Chinje] while I pretend to ask you genuine questions might be suspected of being a stage-managed show?"¹⁶⁰

Indeed, the President's indifference to the private press has been so frustrating that one of the papers, *Challenge Hebdo*¹⁶¹ published an imagined interview ("un entretien franc et direct") with President Biya at his home village of Mvomeka'a. According to Ombe Ndzana, a regular contributor then, this paper was seized in Yaounde. He further pointed out that if *Challenge Hebdo* had resorted to an April fool instead of a real interview, it was because of the marginalisation of the private press by those in power: "Si Charles Ndongho de CRTV peut interviewer le president, pourquoi pas moi. J'aimerais bien rencontrer le president et lui poser quelques questions." How can the president expect a friendly private press when his attitude to them has always been less than friendly?¹⁶² As Boh

¹⁶⁰ *Cameroon Post* N° 68 Thursday May 2-May 9, 1991, p.4

¹⁶¹ N° 065 April 1, 1992

¹⁶² Indeed, relations between President Biya and the critical private press have been quite hostile, and the latter never misses an opportunity to ridicule the former and to present him as an incompetent president, a total failure. One such opportunity to ridicule him was presented by President Biya's visit to Paris in April 1991. To a question by a journalist how he was fairing among Mitterand's African pupils in democracy, the President replied: "Je suis le meilleur élève de François MITTERAND". The papers ridiculed him for cutting a very sorry picture of himself and the country he leads. These papers commented on it so repeatedly that the pro-government *Le Patriote* (N° 108, du 20 au 26 août 1992) was forced to draw attention to

Herbert puts it, “Who do you blame when it is easier for the press to get SDF leader Mr. John Fru Ndi to speak than it is to get a member of government or the Speaker of the Assembly?”¹⁶³

(ii) Justifications for Censorship by MINAT

Some cases in point of how censorship is conducted and justified, are provided by Amougou (1994). According to Amougou, the necessity for public order is used to justify censorship, seizure, and suspension decisions for papers judged guilty of divulging “sensitive and secret information” concerning national defence, justice, diplomacy and government activities. The censor and competent administrative authorities effect this “protection of secrets” in accordance with articles 14, 17, 23 and 24 of law N° 90/052 of December 19, 1990 on Freedom of Mass Communication. “C’est d’eux que dépend l’opportunité de stopper ou non les informations dont la divulgation est jugée compromettante ou non pour l’ordre public.” This craving to control means that “le législateur considère le journaliste comme un (potentiel) trublion dont les écrits devraient être contrôlés.” The basic idea is that the internal and external security of the state, and serenity in affairs of a diplomatic and judicial character, are more important than the citizen’s desire or right to know.

The merit of Amougou’s work comes from the fact that he was able to obtain permission into MINAT to study how aspects of Law N° 90/052 pertaining to censorship were being applied by the administrative censors. The fact that he even

“l’accent sarcastique” and “l’humour” of Biya’s declaration.

managed to obtain office space and that he enjoyed the collaboration of the censors at MINAT, makes his account a privileged one in terms of access to rare documents, decisions and official data.

The first thing one gathers from Amougou's study is that the censor always seeks to justify any decision to censor, seize or ban a paper. From the examples he gives, the reasons include: the need to protect public authorities against falsehood; untruths or falsehoods that are seen to threaten national unity or cohesion; treating the president with contempt; incitation to revolt against government and public institutions; treating the constituted corps and functionaries with contempt; national secrets; diplomatic secrets; judicial secrets; and possession of copies of confidential administrative documents.

Amougou illustrates these with concrete examples, amongst which are:

1.) The need to protect public authorities against falsehood

The Minister of Territorial Administration decided on "la suppression pure et simple" of a front page article on the dummies of *Cameroon Post* titled: "That Presidential Plane, Crew Imbroglio: The Whole Truth," following an assessment report which claimed that instead of the truth on the affair, the newspaper had simply copied from "des fabulation du journal Dikalo" - which alleged that the crew had been released only after the presidency had paid a caution of FCFA 45 million. Nothing the paper said was founded. Thus the recommendation by the assistant director for Political Affairs that the article be totally censored. He justified his decision by arguing that: "Ce journal ne detenant aucune information

exacte sur cette affaire. Au contraire, tout ce qu'il dit ne contribue qu'à l'intoxication." Thus not only was the article said to contain untruths, it was believed to have been published with the intention of tarnishing the image of the head of state (Amougou, 1994:37). Amougou however fails to say what happened to the *Dikalo* from which *Cameroon Post* was supposed to have copied the allegations about the presidential plane and crew.

As Amougou observes, the catch phrase of the censor is often: "Il s'agit de 'fabulations'; le journal n'est pas affirmatif dans ses propos; les informations non fondées; ce journal ne detenant aucune information exacte; l'intoxication" (Amougou, 1994:38).

2.) Untruths or falsehoods that are seen to threaten national unity or cohesion

Amougou notes that many pages and articles in dummies "ont été supprimés pour leur caractère mensonger et nuisible à la cohésion nationale" (Amougou, 1994:40). He illustrates this with two examples: In the first, the decision was taken to suppress certain passages of an article devoted to the burnt Moloko Market in Yaounde, in *La Nouvelle République* N° 003 du 16 juin 1992. The reason being that: "Analysant l'incendie du marché Mokolo, le journal semble mettre la tribu Beti en cause, tribu qui serait décidée à chasser d'une manière ou d'une autre, les Anglo-Bami et les Nordistes". The censors were unanimous that the passages in question "incitent à la haine et devraient par conséquent disparaître avant la parution de ce journal" (Amougou, 1994:41).

The second example concerns an article titled "L'Opération BADR 312," published in *L'Harmattan* N° 010 du 31 janvier 1992. According to the censor, "Parlant des

événements survenus à la Briqueterie le 24 janvier dernier, Bourdane Withol de l'Harmattan les surnomme Opération BADR 2 en référence à la fameuse bataille sous forme guerrière BADR 312 menée et gagnée par le prophète Mohamet en Arabie Saoudite. L'auteur qualifie ces événements de complot contre les musulmans tramé par le catholique Emah Basile. Dans un ton particulièrement virulent, il accuse les autres communautés religieuses d'observer un mutisme complice. Il critique en même temps les dignitaires musulmans de n'avoir pas pris officiellement position dans cette affaire." The censor then concludes that the article "est très dangereux pour être autorisé à paraître. Il est de nature à envenimer le conflit, mieux le litige qui oppose la communauté musulmane à la communauté urbaine de Yaoundé. En un mot, il s'agit d'une incitation à la révolte avec une référence historique qui dit tout" (Amougou, 1994:42-43).

3.) *Treating the president with contempt*

Amougou gives the following examples: An article titled: "B... comme Boigny et Biya" was suppressed from the dummies of *Galaxie* N° 43 du 19 juin 1992 because its author, editor-in-chief of the paper D. Atangana, qualified Presidents Biya and Boigny as "Malfrats arrivés au pouvoir par la bénédiction coloniale," and for referring to them as "nullités au pouvoir à Yaoundé et à Yamoussoukro" and as "d'autocrates, de dictateurs et de kleptocrates". The second example is that of an open letter to the president of the republic published in *L'Harmattan* N° 010 du 31 janvier 1992, which was suppressed because of its "discourtoisie feutrée". According to the censor, the letter intimated that "le Président Biya doit démissionner parce qu'il est incapable de diriger". In the third example, many passages and articles in the dummies of *L'Harmattan* of 14 au

21 mai 1992 were suppressed by the censor because of “des expressions incriminées” such as this against Mrs Jeanne-Irène Biya: “Si le Président est aussi patriote et intelligent que moi, il balayera d’abord devant sa porte, en répudiant Jeanne, c’est elle qui piochait à la SCB (Société camerounaise de banque), et la formule ne serait pas nouvelle (cf. Mandela et Winnie).” Amougou’s fourth example is the famous open letter by Célestin Monga to President Biya published in *Le Messager* N° 209 du 27 décembre 1990. The censor judged “insolent” a passage in Monga’s letter which read: “j’ai été choqué par le ton outrageusement condescendant, paternaliste et prétentieux que vous avez employé à l’Assemblée Nationale ... pour vous adresser au peuple” (Amougou, 1994:64-65).

4.) Incitation to revolt against the government and institutions

Amougou gives as example once more *Le Messager* N° 209 of 27 December 1990 which was seized because it contained articles qualified as “menaces à l’ordre public” and as “incitation des camerounais à la révolte”. That is how the censor understood Monga’s “warning” to President Biya, contained in his open letter on doctored democracy to which reference has been made already: “Ne vous méprenez pas sur la patience manifestée par les camerounais jusqu’à présent, ils sont capables du meilleur comme du pire”. According to Amougou, another reason why the paper was seized was an article by Mongo Beti, certain passages of which were qualified by the censor as “appel au soulèvement populaire”. One of such passages reads: “En fait de stratégie commune, nous pouvons nous accorder sur ce mot: Paul Biya doit partir, d’une façon ou d’une autre, d’abord parce que quand un homme politique a mené son pays jusqu’au désastre omnidimensionnel,

dont chacun peut être témoin au Cameroun, on voit mal ce qu'il pourrait faire d'autre que de disparaître" (Amougou, 1994:65-66.1).

The second example is an article in *Galaxie* N° 44 du 26 juin 1992 titled: "Toumani Touré à l'honneur," which was completely suppressed for "incitation des militaires à la révolte". In the said article, after congratulating Colonel Toumani Touré for his successful overthrow of President Moussa Traoré of Mali, D. Atangana says that: "son exemple [Toumani Touré's] devrait être suivi par les militaires camerounais et ivoiriens, complices des gangsters au pouvoir qui habitent illégitimement les palais d'Etoudi et de Yamoussoukro" (Amougou, 1994:66.1).

5.) Treating the constituted corps and functionaries with contempt

Here once again, Célestin Monga's open letter is an example. The censor found the following passages "injurieux et hautement toxiques" (Amougou, 1994: 67): First, to the President: "Êtes-vous fier, en tant que Premier Magistrat du pays, de la Justice camerounaise actuelle, qui condamne en priorité ceux qui n'ont pas su corrompre le Tribunal (...). A votre place je serais moins triomphaliste." And second, to the members of parliament: "Il n'est pas normal que des députés illettrés votent clandestinement, sans publicité, des lois qui engagent l'avenir de tout un peuple" (Amougou, 1994:67).

The second example is Thomas Eyoum à Ntoh's "Lettre au PM" in *Dikalo* N° 036 du 24 août 1993. This letter refers to Prime Minister Achidi Achu as "Monsieur le P(istolet) M(itrailleur)," which the censor thought "insultait le Chef du gouvernement et minimisait son action à savoir la restauration de l'autorité de l'Etat" (Amougou, 1994:68). Prior to this, the

following passage was censored from an article titled “L’opposition se tait” in *Dikalo* N° 030, for reasons of protecting members of government: “pour restaurer l’autorité de l’Etat, le pouvoir n’a rien fait d’autre que de redonner des ailes aux faucons que sont Jean Fochivé, Gilbert Andze Tsoungui, Joseph Owona, Augustin Kontchou Kouomegni. Ce qui est conforme au type d’Etat qu’il semble vouloir réinstaurer: un Etat-Policier” (Amougou, 1994:68).

In his third example, Amougou comments that *Galaxie* N° 31 du 17 mars 1992 was seized because of many articles and cartooning “ayant attiré négativement l’attention de l’autorité administrative” (Amougou, 1994:68). Among these were “des commentaires reconnus injurieux et diffamatoires à l’endroit du Vice-Premier Ministre chargé de l’Administration territoriale.” These comments included: “Andze Tsoungui en question: Notre Ministre de l’Administration territoriale dans toute sa médiocrité politique”; “Andze Tsoungui, inspecteur fédéral anti-nationaliste!”; “Le Ministre de l’Administration terroriste, poseur de bombe!”; and “Taisez-vous! Ministre illettré! Le MINAT n’est pas à votre niveau!” (Amougou, 1994:68-69).

Finally, as an example of how the censor protects civil servants from contempt, Amougou refers to the censorship of an article by Cena Ngangue in *Galaxie* N° 43 du 19 juin 1992. In this article Ngangue terms censorship “connerie” and the censors “cons”. He refers to the chief of cabinet for the Governor of the Littoral Province as “premier énergomène venu” and “ostrogoth qui se permet de biffer les textes”. To the censor the article was a: “diatribe à l’endroit de Monsieur Mbozo’o Pascal le Chef de Cabinet du Gouverneur de la Province du Littoral pour le travail de censure qu’il effectue” (Amougou, 1994:69).

6.) *National and diplomatic secrets*

When *La Nouvelle République* N° 006 du 26 août 1992 attempted an analysis of a book, *Un Message*, by General Asso'o Emame Benoît, published in 1992 but banned for containing sensitive military information, it was censored. The censor wrote: "L'ouvrage du Général Asso'o a été interdit. Il serait maladroit de laisser paraître quelque commentaire que ce soit sur ce livre. Nous proposons le retrait pur et simple de cette analyse" (Amougou, 1994:77&89).

Concerning diplomatic secrets, Amougou gives the example of an article in the abovementioned *La Nouvelle République* titled: "Le Cameroun a-t-il encore une diplomatie dans les organisations internationales?". This article was censored from the dummy because of "publication d'informations sur la diplomatie camerounaise de nature à porter atteinte à l'ordre public". The censor's argument was that: "Pour Marie Duita Shandy Djowo, alors que dans les années 70, le Cameroun rayonnait dans toutes les grandes sphères internationales, depuis 1982 la situation est plus alarmante. Et si rien n'est fait, poursuit-elle, le Cameroun ne comptera plus de hauts fonctionnaires à la tête des organisations du système des Nations-Unies. Deux raisons sont évoquées: l'absentéisme du Président Paul Biya aux sommets de l'OUA et de l'ONU (deux participations en 10 ans pour l'OUA); la proposition à de hauts postes dans les organismes internationaux de médiocres et incompetents "Béti" au détriment des plus valeureux "Bamiléké" A publication of this nature, the censor concluded, was too politicised to be allowed to circulate. Everything judged critical of Cameroonian diplomacy can be censored (Amougou, 1994:82-84).

7.) *Judicial secrets*

As an example of what was censored under judicial secrets, Amougou refers to an article in the dummies of *Cameroon Post* (N° 141, January 7-14, 1993, pp.8-9) titled: “Bamenda Detainees Speak Out”. This article consisted of eight interviews in which those arrested for “violent demonstrations” following the proclamation of the results of the 1992 presidential elections, revealed and condemned the circumstances surrounding their arrests, the conditions under which they were detained, the interrogations and subsequent debates. Also censored from the same paper was a page 7 article titled: “Detainees Trip to Kondengui”. According to the censor, the said article: “révélaient une mesure secrète prise par les autorités compétentes de transférer les personnes arrêtées suites aux évènements “violentes” sus-évoqués, des geoles de Bamenda à la prison centrale de Yaoundé.” According to Amougou, *Cameroon Post* did not respect the censor’s decision, as it went ahead and published the censored article (Amougou, 1994:93). This happened despite the fact that the law punishes the partial- or non-respect of censorship decisions. Normally, no trace of the decision to censor must be noticed on the papers after printing. All blank spaces, cancellations or the inscription “CENSURE” are forbidden, for, as the censor noted, “obéir lentement n’est pas obéir” (Amougou, 1994:150). Amougou illustrates this with the examples of *Cameroon Post* (French), *Le Nouvel Independent* and *Cameroun Mon Pays* which were either seized or suspended for non-respect of the censor’s decision (Amougou, 1994:150).

8.) *Possession of copies of confidential administrative documents*

As examples on how the law may punish journalists for possession of copies of confidential administrative documents, Amougou cites the court cases by government against Pius Njawe of *Le Messager* and Benjamin Zebaze and Martin Waffo of *Challenge Hebdo*. On August 17, 1993, the Douala court of first instance passed a verdict sentencing Pius Njawe “à six mois d’emprisonnement avec sursis pendant 3 ans pour prise de copies, sans autorisation d’un document appartenant à l’administration”. In a second verdict Benjamin Zebaze and Martin Waffo were each condemned to 5 months in prison for “coaction de détention sans autorisation de copie de document appartenant à l’administration”. The confidential document referred to in both cases were copies of a letter written by the Minister of Justice and Keeper of the Seals, Douala Moutomé, to the Prime Minister, Simon Achidi Achu. This letter was reproduced in *Challenge Hebdo* (N° 030 du lundi 22 au jeudi 29 avril 1993) under the title: “A la Veille de la Conference Nationale Souveraine, Moutomé Livre Fru Ndi: Le Chairman Risque la Peine de Mort”; and a few days later in *Le Messager* (N° 021 du 26 avril 1993) under the title: “Moutomé Veut Inculper Fru Ndi d’Assassinat” (Amougou, 1994:97-98).

Thus in sum, if one were to judge by the intensity of censorship, the number of seizures, suspensions or bans, the cases of intimidation, invasion or sequestration by the police or military, the level of indifference and hostility by the president and his collaborators, it would be difficult to claim the December 1990 law on communications changed much in practice.¹⁶⁴ Whether actually fighting for democracy or simply

^{164.} Reporters sans Frontières has given a meticulous documentation of many instances of government infringement of press freedom in 1991

using it as an ideology, the critical private press has been successful in presenting itself, thanks to the repressive application of the Freedom of Mass Communication law, as victim of a government unwilling to make any real concessions to democracy. In this way, the critical private press could be said to have contributed in unmasking government's reluctance to undertake a significant and wide-ranging democratisation of society in Cameroon.

(v) The Law and the Newspaper Vendor

We remarked above that the government-press relationship is one of conflict. The relationship between government and the vendor is not only equally conflictual, but follows exactly the same pattern as the government-press relationship. As the crackdown on the critical press intensifies during crisis (e.g., the "ghost town" of 1991 and early 1992) and during critical national events (e.g., the 1992 elections and their aftermath), the hostility towards the vendor increases as well.

The vendor is made to understand that his hands are tied, and that he is not free to sell what he wants or what the public likes. Despite the law which gives him the freedom to sell all publications without exception¹⁶⁵, the vendor finds himself forbidden the sale of certain papers critical of government. The censor has thus imposed on the vendor *Cameroon Tribune*, *Le Patriote*, *Le Témoin* and all that is favourable to government, not because this is what the public wants, but because the government believes that it risks nothing and gains much by having them in circulation. In 1991 and 1992 when certain

(see *Le Messager* (English) Vol. II N° 017 Monday May 4 1992 and *Le Messager* (French) N° 260 du 30 avril 1992, for details).

¹⁶⁵. see section 30 of law N° 090/052 of December 19, 1990

critical papers continued to be published despite their suspension or the ban on them, the vendors were sometimes obliged to legitimate (or hide) their selling these papers by inserting them in *Cameroon Tribune* or other pro-government papers. As Nicolas Tejouemessie observed at the time, “the vendors are persecuted night and day because they contribute ... to the fight for freedom of expression. They do it by serving as a transmission link between the similarly persecuted editor and the readership eager for information.”¹⁶⁶

This persecution, what form does it take? In principle, as soon as the censor decrees that a paper is unhealthy for public consumption, for the reason that it is a danger to public order and good morals, the forces of law and order are mobilised to limit or stop its distribution and circulation, in contravention of the law which authorises, without exception, the sale of publications. The first target is the vendor. The forces of law and order or the agents of CENER are the supposed seizers. Their task, in principle, is to raid the kiosks and other areas of sale and to seize all the papers considered dangerous. Officially, the papers thus seized are taken to the Groupement Mobile d’Intervention (GMI), to the police station or to the CENER bureau of the town or city where the seizure has taken place. But in practice the commitment and zeal of those entrusted with the task of seizing offensive papers, is more towards their personal interests than collective good.

Much of the evidence gathered from vendors in the course of this study, indicates that the seizures are often conducted in a “brutal and inhuman” manner. The vendors are victims of arrests, beatings and other forms of physical torture, and detention without trial. According to *La Messagère*,¹⁶⁷ between

¹⁶⁶ *Challenge Nouveau*, N° 22 du jeudi 25 février au jeudi 04 mars 1993, P.2

¹⁶⁷ N° 015 du 17 mars 1993, p.7

May 1992 and March 1993, the vendors were daily pursued, sprayed with tear gas, deprived of their stock of newspapers sometimes without any document to justify the seizure, robbed of their sales and thrown into cells, where they were forced to promise never again to sell newspapers that are suspended. As Nicolas Tejouemessie affirms, the vendors were “released only on the price of a ‘small fortune’ along with an undertaking never again to sell ‘seizable newspapers’”.¹⁶⁸ Even if these allegations are sometimes exaggerated for political ends, they are not invented.

Nicolas Tejouemessie estimates that in Douala, in 1991 and 1992, more than three thousand copies of ‘undesired papers’ were seized every day at some twenty or so sale-spots. But all these seizures were not always carried out by real CENER agents, but by impostors as well. However, the vendors did not find it easy to distinguish the real from the fake CENER agents, thus their constant victimisation by persons in plain clothes.¹⁶⁹ In 1991 and 1992 the sale of suspended newspapers was such a risky business that many vendors preferred not to display them, and would propose these papers only to clients about whom they had no suspicions at all. But looks can be deceitful.¹⁷⁰ According to Nicolas Tejouemessie, distrust was the watchword of the vendors who saw in the face of certain clients the image of CENER; but condemned as they were to sell for subsistence, they were obliged to bear the risks.

Routinely, while the vendors were taken away to cells of

¹⁶⁸ *Challenge Nouveau*, N° 22 du jeudi 25 février au jeudi 04 mars 1993, P.2

¹⁶⁹ see *Challenge Nouveau* N° 22 du jeudi 25 février au jeudi 04 mars 1993, p. 11; N° 07 du lundi 16 novembre 1992, p. 11; N° 22 du jeudi 25 février au jeudi 04 mars 1993, p. 2; N° 016 du 18 janvier 1993, p.13; and N° 017 du jeudi 21 au jeudi 28 janvier 1993, p.5; and also *La Messagère* N° 281 du 17 octobre 1992, p. 13

¹⁷⁰ see *La Messagère* N° 015 du 17 mars 1993, p.7&10

the political police, the seized papers, on their part, did not always go where they should have been taken. Instead, they were taken to various places in town where they were sold at exorbitant prices. Sometimes they were simply sold back at much reduced prices to the vendors, who were either forced to accept or who readily entered the deal.

In 1991 and 1992 certain policemen and agents developed a network of traffic in seized newspapers. In *La Messagère*¹⁷¹ Benjamin Lissoum Lissoum gives the example of Ngami, an inspector of police with the Mfoundi special branch police station. *Challenge Nouveau*¹⁷² on its part, talks of “a Machiavellian plan brought to light” of “the traffic in newspapers at CENER”. Accordingly, CENER was so enthusiastic to “illegally confine newspaper vendors” and did “not hesitate to bring back to the market newspapers illegally seized”. To some, the seizure of suspended newspapers became “a lucrative activity”. Alphonse Sinkam believes that there were even “imaginary seizures” with the complicity of some vendors, “organised in order to make money,” to the detriment of the newspaper publishers: A piece of paper bearing the stamp of the Centre National de Documentation (CND) was issued to the vendor accomplice, who could “brandish it in the face of his distributor as ‘proof’ that there was seizure”. According to vendors I talked to, at the beginning of the week the members of the security made a round of the kiosks to find out when the distribution of suspended newspapers was due. On the planned day they returned ready to seize; sometimes they were in such haste that certain papers unaffected by the ban or suspension were seized.

Papers thus seized with the complicity of certain vendors were sometimes re-sold to the same vendors at “75 francs a

¹⁷¹ N° 07 du 13 janvier 1993, p. 12

¹⁷² N° 22 du jeudi 25 février au jeudi 04 mars 1993, p. 2

paper” instead of the 200 francs it normally sold for. The sale of newspapers was in this way more fruitful for the CENER agent and the vendor accomplice, but a loss for the newspaper publishers.

Tientcheu Kameni believes that the persecution of the critical papers and their vendors was a government ploy to make sure that “the most influential, most read and most admired newspapers can no longer sell”.¹⁷³ Whether the suspended papers were indeed the most influential, the most read and the most admired, can only be established by an opinion poll that is representative. Indeed, a study conducted by the Centre de Recherche et l’Etude en Economie et Sondage (CRETES) and financed by the Fondation Friedrich-Ebert (May 1993), revealed the state-owned, government-controlled *Cameroon Tribune* (35%), as the most “preferred” or the most “read” paper; with *Le Messager* (*La Messagère*) (33%), the most popular private paper, coming only in second place (FFE, 1993:5). But it is very difficult for papers about which the government is so preoccupied and which are subjected to such intense persecution, not to have the delusion of popularity and importance. Moreover, the very fact that these papers were suspended or seized, made the public curious to know what was published in these papers that made the government so eager to suspend or to seize them. So much so that even without money to buy a copy, many people, thanks to the complacency or understanding of the vendor, were able to rent, read and return or to stand at a kiosk and simply flip through the papers.¹⁷⁴ But this is far from saying that the papers in

¹⁷³ *La Messagère* N° 015 du 17 mars 1993

¹⁷⁴ *Le Messager* (N° 001 Tuesday January 7, 1992, p.1) confirms this point in an editorial after the lifting of a ban by MINAT, when it writes: “... each time we are persecuted, our credibility increases. This has almost become part of the regime’s assignment: namely to build heroes out of

question were necessarily the most influential, the most read or the most admired by the public.

This administrative hostility towards critical papers, pushed certain vendors in 1991 and 1992, sometimes instigated by publishers of anti-government publications, to fight a counter-fight of a purely political nature. These, for non-commercial purposes, chose not to sell *Cameroon Tribune* and/or other pro-government papers, while having them in stock. And in the end give back the unsold copies, and be reimbursed. This can also be considered as censorship practised by the vendors against pro-establishment papers. There is also the censorship practised during the “ghost town” and civil disobedience period by the populations of certain towns like Bamenda, Bafoussam and Douala where the opposition was in the majority. In these towns one ran a great risk of being assaulted if one was selling or had bought *Cameroon Tribune*, the official paper. But we must however differentiate between this type of intolerance by opposition activists and the legal or arbitrary practice by government aimed at stifling alternative voices and tightening its grip on power.

Much concern has been expressed by some journalists and publishers about the distribution of newspapers in Cameroon. Henriette Ekwe of *Kamerun Nouveau*¹⁷⁵, claims that the “distribution des journaux est contrôlée par les gros lobbies - le Laakam.” She claims that it suffices for Laakam to announce in tontines that such and such a paper be boycotted or that this paper be supported, for that to happen. The business in Cameroon is mainly in the hands of the Bamileke, so is the little advertising money that is made available to the press. The

inconsequential. *Le Messenger* has become a real monument, a household word, an institution, so to say. All this has been achieved with very little effort, except for the work of overzealous surrogates of the regime.”

¹⁷⁵ interviewed, 30/09/1994 in Douala

serious press is in the main of the Bamileke, who can employ vendors or make these dependent on them financially, thus the likelihood of the powerful publishers coercing the vendors to hide certain papers and promote others.

The private press thus muffled through the selective application of the law, the government finds itself neither with a viable opposition, nor with critical media, especially as the CRTV and *Cameroon Tribune* are under its exclusive control. And what contribution to democratisation by the press is possible in a context where only one voice, only one way of seeing, thinking and doing is tolerated? How can the press play a positive role in the democratisation of Cameroon when the law, even in its imperfection, is not applied in a clear, consistent and just manner?

In this chapter, the basic assumption is that the private press and their practitioners best serve democracy not only by informing their readership on the virtues of democracy, but by applying democratic instruments themselves. Being professional by being objective and neutral mediators is the best way for the media to unite society around a democratic culture.

(i) The Private Press and the Journalism of Excesses

If the law on Freedom of Communication and its implementation have made it difficult for the private press to operate freely and to contribute to the democratisation of society by providing access to alternative voices, the private press has on its part, compounded that difficulty with its unprofessional practice of journalism. The private press has seen democracy in purely political terms, and defined the democratic process as the struggle between those who have Cameroon's best interests at heart and those who are out merely to satisfy selfish interests and greed for power. Depending on what side of the political spectrum a paper finds itself, truth is either from the opposition or the government. There is little respect for evidence. Journalism has become an exercise in turning a blind eye on the shortcomings of those a paper supports, while highlighting and/or exaggerating the weaknesses of those a paper opposes.

This part of the study, in essence argues that such partisan journalism, no matter how attractive it may be to people desperate for change or desperate to maintain the status quo, is

little informed by the professional canons of honesty, accuracy and fairness. The ability of politicised or partisan journalism to give all sides of a story, to avoid biased language, comment and opinion in news-stories and reports, to dwell on issues and avoid *ad hominem* remarks, has been crippled by the tendency to break Cameroonians down into the “righteous” and the “wicked” depending on whether they are in opposition or in government. The impression is given that being good or bad is much less a question of what one is or what one does than a question of where one stands politically. Such partisanship blinds the journalists to their professional beliefs and ethics, and to the fact that “leur mission ... est d’éclairer le public, et non pas de l’endoctriner” (Owona, 1995:135).

In the current democratic process, the Cameroonian journalists (both official and private) have been accused of professional impropriety, not only by government and other prominent political actors, but by the general public and even by fellow professionals at home and abroad. The press has been accused of “journalistic hooliganism,” of “observing a conniving silence” over certain happenings, while being “irresponsible and reckless” in reporting others; thus bringing Cameroon “to the brink of civil war”.¹⁷⁶ The private press has been accused of using “la facilité et la frivolité” to mask “ses nombreuses lacunes”.¹⁷⁷ As Grégoire Owona remarked of the press shortly after the October 1992 presidential elections¹⁷⁸, “la mode actuellement au Cameroun est à l’invective, à la dénonciation, à la calomnie et même à l’injure. [...] Et tous ceux qui calomnient et dénoncent veulent apparaître aux yeux

^{176.} Ngoh Nkwain, *Cameroon Post* N° 41 Thursday August 30 - September 6, 1990, p.4

¹⁷⁷ see Keye Ndogo (*Jeune Afrique* N° 1781 du 23 février au 1er mars 1995, p.64)

¹⁷⁸ *Le Messager* N° 281 du 17 octobre 1992, p.14

du public comme des héros, menacés et persécutés.” On his part, Albert Mbida¹⁷⁹ accuses the critical private press of selecting for insults, defamation and scandals only public authorities or individuals sympathetic with the government. Thus giving the impression members of the opposition – including even those who have served in government before – are beyond blemish. “Qu’attend la presse privée “indépendante” pour nous révéler les scandales politico-financiers de certains leaders de l’opposition,” he asks. Ahanda, in the same paper, makes the very point in his letter to the journalists of the anti-government private press, the insinuation being that this press, essentially Bamileke-owned and Bamileke-controlled, is observing a conniving silence over the financial misdeeds of the Bamileke businessmen and opposition politicians:

“Pour être honnête, j’ai beaucoup admiré la détermination avec laquelle vous avez traqué et dénoncé les “fossoyeurs” du Cameroun. Mais je dois quand même reconnaître que tous, vous avez délibérément oublié ceux qui importent du champagne et déclarent l’eau minérale à la douane, ceux qui ne payent pas leurs impôts depuis des décennies. Traquez, traquez toujours, mais balayez devant vos portes.”

The press has been called all sorts of names, from “cocktail,” “gombo” or “survival” journalism on the one hand, to “le journalisme de combat,” “liberation journalism,” “journalisme insurrectionnel” or “jungle journalism” on the other. The private press is seen as leaning “too overtly towards commentary and opinion.” Although it could be argued that

¹⁷⁹

Le Patriote, N° 73 du 14 juin 1991, p.10

journalists probably focus on commentary and opinion because these are much less perishable than the news which they cannot come out with in time because of financial and censorship problems, and above all, difficult access to information, the fact remains that such opinion and commentary have often been presented as if they were the news. The press has also been accused, and rightly so, of sensationalism and of frightening rather than reassuring its readership. Like Zachee Nzoh-*Ngandemou* observes, “In Cameroon every newspaper you read frightens you. It predicts doom and prescribes hellfire.” He accuses the critical private press of “uncivilised behaviour” by seeking to confront an indecent government with indecent language, and wonders whether the press “couldn’t ... use more decent words and still convey the same message?”¹⁸⁰ An opinion and concern shared by *Nga Ndongo*, who concludes, after a content analysis, that “la courtoisie et la décence ne semblent pas être la chose la mieux partagée dans le monde de la presse privée camerounaise,” and that it seems as if the papers were competing for “la meilleure injure” or the insult that is “la plus grossière, la plus ordurière et la plus malfaisante” (*Nga Ndongo*, 1993:153). This should not be the case, and nothing in the profession justifies the use of indecent language. And journalists should know that “the urgency of the message should not give rise to shoddiness of form” nor to rage (*Agbor Tabi*, 1995:8).

The private press has equally been libellous, and the volume of court cases and letters to the editors complaining against defamation and falsehood, are there to prove this. Indeed, this area is so rich in data that it requires a separate study.¹⁸¹ For now, it suffices to note that the most recurrent

¹⁸⁰ *Cameroon Post* N° 117, July 17-24 1992, p.6

¹⁸¹ For an idea of court cases concerning the press between 1990 and 1993, see *Datchoua Soupa Casimir's* paper: “Des Cas de Répressions des

criticism of the private press in this regard is the tendency to rush into publication after hearing only one side of a story, and most often very distortedly for that matter. Newspapers are known to be sponsored by some individuals or interest groups to blackmail certain institutions, individuals, or interest groups. In almost every letter to the editor I have examined, the complainant has questioned the professionalism of the journalist or paper concerned. Three examples: In *Cameroon Post*¹⁸², François Sengat-Kuo complained against a story published in an earlier edition of the paper alleging that he had embezzled 300 million francs of the Film Industry Development Fund (FODIC). He questioned the journalistic competence of the paper when he wrote:

“I do not know if you fully measure the extent of the moral prejudice you are causing me by publishing without previous verification and what is more giving the impression of believing it, such groundless information, which obviously aims at doing harm, for no reason at all.

It seems to me that a serious newspaper should look carefully several times and verify their accuracy before adding faith to, and publishing such declarations, from whatever source they may come...”

In the second example, still about the *Cameroon Post*¹⁸³, the Nigerian Consul-General in Buea, Miss Clara O. Avboraye,

Délits de Presse entre 1990-1993” presented at a UNESCO organised seminar in Yaounde September 6-10, 1993), on the press and the law. For a thorough legal analysis of the sanctions provided for by the law, see the study done for the Fondation Friedrich-Ebert by Le Cabinet Juric and Le Cabinet Brain Trust Consulting and Business Inc, published in August 1994, titled: *La Justice des Médias au Cameroun*.

¹⁸² N° 38 Tuesday July 31 - August 7, 1990, p.2

¹⁸³ N° 100 March 6 - 13, 1991, p.2

complained against an article in an earlier edition:

“I do not know where your Kumba correspondent by name Dat Williams learnt his jungle journalism. Responsible newspapers ... as a rule cross-check facts put to them before going to the press. Alas, the contrary is the case with correspondents of your newspaper. What is more you Mr. Editor also published the libellous article about me without first ascertaining whether or not the story was true...”

In the third example Hon. Dr Shu, MP, complained to *Le Messenger*¹⁸⁴ that:

“I was terribly embarrassed and shocked to find in LE MESSENGER N° 017 of 5 February 1991 on page 6, an article in which the insulting word “ignorance” was used about the Speaker of the National Assembly and attributed to me as its author. You know it, and God in Heaven knows I never used that word.”

Albert Mbida¹⁸⁵ is one of those who believe the private press would be less libellous and defamatory, were the sanctions by the law more severe. Using the case of *International News Hebdo*, he argues that the private press does not care to be responsible or professional because the court sentences are usually very light and suspended. Since the private press repeatedly attacks state authorities and selectively publishes only scandals that concern members of government or their supporters, Mbida thinks that suspended sentences should be abolished “d’une part pour protéger efficacement les autorités

¹⁸⁴ N° 021 Monday March 25, 1991, p.11

¹⁸⁵ *Le Patriote* N° 73 du 14 juin 1991, p.10

publiques et d'autre part pour annuler le bénéfice moral ou matériel retiré de l'infraction." He sees no reason why the law should be gentle towards an offender who keeps committing the same offence.¹⁸⁶ But before making the law more severe, it should be ensured that it is applied in a fair manner.

According to the FFE study of 1993 on public attitudes to the media, the CRTV vox pop for "Cameroon Calling" of 21/02/93, and critical reaction in the press by the readership, the Cameroonian journalists are seen as mouthpieces for competing political pressure groups by the public. The pressures on them to please those for whom they work are so overwhelming that they cannot report objectively on all sides of an issue in the most attentive and self-critical manner, suppressing personal prejudices and sticking to the facts. Although the journalists know that the public is entitled to be properly informed, they have not succeeded in rising beyond distortions, half-truths, deliberate omissions and outright falsehoods; which according to J.B. Fonyam,¹⁸⁷ have "caused moral torture to many a citizen of this country". The private press pushes everyone else to the wall with its half-truths or blatant lies, claiming infallibility. Although very hostile to negative criticism of their *manière de faire*, the private press journalists do not hesitate to judge, instruct, moralise and condemn others. Nga Ndong sums up such double standards thus:

"En effet, tandis qu'il rejette toute critique et tout jugement négatif à son encontre, le journal ne se prive pas de donner des leçons, faire la morale, noter, juger et condamner ceux qu'il considère comme des hérétiques ou,

¹⁸⁶ *Le Patriote* N° 73 du 14 juin 1991, p.10

¹⁸⁷ see *Cameroon Post* N° 47 Thursday October 25 - November 1, 1990, p. 12

comme il dit, atteints de “Sida mental,” “d’analphabétisme fonctionnel” ou “de médiocrité”. Le journal, il est vrai, a toujours raison. Même lorsqu’il a tort ou est dans l’erreur, il s’entête, de mille manières, procédures, chicanes, arguties et opinions capiteuses, à la façon d’un avocat, à montrer que c’est lui qui a raison, ceux qui le critique ayant tort ou étant inaptes à comprendre” (Nga Ndong, 1993:145).

Thus Cameroonians aspiring for real democracy, have little interest in newspapers which can bend over backwards in favour of the government or the opposition. They want the press to be honest, fair and accurate with the truth. Not only is the public aware that the journalists are partisan and self-interested, they are also concerned by the fact that it is difficult if not impossible to find journalists who go for the truth and who treat it with the respect and distance that a news-story deserves (cf. FFE, 1993 (mai)). But the private press suffers from the delusion that those who appreciate and encourage its partisan journalism are representative of public opinion in the country. Thus the tendency in the critical press to see censorship always in terms of government’s desire to keep Cameroonians in ignorance, and seldom in terms of the desire to protect Cameroonians from mass-mediated falsehood.

Some journalists do not deny that the press has been “spurious,” “crudely sensational,” and “lavishly libellous,” but they, like Ngho Nkwain¹⁸⁸ argue that the profession and the courts should be allowed the free hand to deal with these excesses. Others like Hilary Kebila Fokum¹⁸⁹, argue that while the private press may be accused of being “excessively sensational,” it cannot be claimed that such sensationalism has

¹⁸⁸ Ngho Nkwain, *Cameroon Post* N° 41 Thursday August 30 - September 6, 1990, p.4

¹⁸⁹ *Le Messenger* N° 001 Tuesday January 7, 1992, p.6

been pointless. Using as example the controversy of who, between President Paul Biya and the Moslem community, owned a piece of land in Tsinga-Yaounde, he argues that had it not been for the private and “aggressive” press, President Biya would not have yielded control of the land to the Moslems. It is therefore thanks to “the searchlight of the private press” that today the people are able to “see through that darkness” imposed by government on issues of vital importance to them. Thus his conclusion that: “Now that politicians have started vomiting in broad daylight the hectares of land they swallowed in the heart of the night, the private press should not relent.” It should encourage others to follow the example of the Moslem community by marching until the national conference is granted and “missing billions from the treasury” recovered.¹⁹⁰

This attitude or outlook is true of many other countries in Africa, where journalists have come to realise that were they to practise journalism according to the rule book, publishing only verified facts, shunning rumour and respecting ethical prescriptions, corruption would wreak havoc with impunity in their societies (Rying, 1994:19). As Rying notes of Francophone Africa, having chosen “La dénonciation *ad hominem* de malversations financières et de scandales” as a journalistic genre, most newspapers, because of the scarcity of credible news sources, “naviguent entre rumeurs et informations,” knowing that any attempt to respect “la déontologie” or “les règles d’or du journalisme d’investigation,” would mean a tacit endorsement of “une corruption délétère pour le corps social” (Rying, 1994:19). This explanation notwithstanding, journalism that has little or no respect for evidence, fairness and accuracy, cannot be termed professional, no matter its appeal or its popularity with the disaffected.

¹⁹⁰

Le Messenger N° 001 Tuesday January 7, 1992, p.6

(ii) Lack of Professionalism and Adequate Organisation

To talk of a profession is to talk of a group of people who distinguish themselves through their training and competence to practise a given trade. A profession is like a club: with its members, its by-laws, its values, its attitudes and its ideals. It is going to admit or retain as members only those prepared to respect its vision of things, its rules and regulations, and its approach. Those whose values are different or whose attitudes do not conform will be excluded. One cannot talk of a profession where anyone can do what he likes how he likes. To talk of a profession is also to talk of solidarity, of team spirit. Given that no profession would normally open its doors to the unqualified, that professions are exclusive, selective and elitist in nature, it is important for members of any given profession to be organised and united in order best to defend their interests, often in the minority and in competition or conflict with other interests. Unity is strength. Thus a profession whose members are disorganised and divided among themselves, is vulnerable to manipulation by both internal and external forces.

To minimise the risk of internal divisions and manipulation from without, to attain high professional standards, in order best to fulfill its responsibilities towards the public and the society, a profession needs a consensus or a code of ethics - that is to say, a minimum of values, of principles or rules, of practices and of common aspirations on which its members are expected to agree. A code of conduct is to a profession what the corner stone is to a building.

In what concerns journalism in Cameroon, this study considers the lack of adequate professional organisation, unity and solidarity among journalists, partly responsible for the failure by the media to play a significant and positive role in the

democratisation process. It examines the major causes of the disorganisation, disunity or lack of solidarity, and argues in favour of the need for professionalism, organisation and unity. A consensus code of conduct would be facilitated by a common professional socialisation process; that is, if journalists are made to “see themselves as pursuing shared goals and enjoying relatively full communications and relative unanimity in judging professional matters” (Gareau, 1987:598).

In 1992 Michel Epee made the observation that journalism is one of the rare professions in Cameroon “où les membres ne sont pas encore organisés en structure, susceptible de contenir l’assaut de nombreux aventuriers et de mythomanes qui souhaitent y accéder,” and also, “de défendre leurs intérêts propres.”¹⁹¹ His observation is as true of Cameroonian journalism today, as it was before 1992. What accounts for the lack of adequate organisation and unity around a common set of values and interests? The reasons are many, although some of them are more focused upon than others depending on whose diagnosis one takes into account.

Most journalists in the private press, and some in the official media, blame on the government the failure by them to come up with professional associations grouping journalists of both the official and private media. They argue that the government has done much to discourage professional solidarity among them. Journalists of the official media have not been allowed to join or form professional organisations of any kind, even though fellow civil servants in the medical and legal professions have had such organisations. In the private press, it is claimed that the authorities have never allowed the creation of a serious association capable of working without interference from government. An excuse difficult to

¹⁹¹. *Le Messenger* N° 254 du 19 mars 1992, p. 12

understand in the face of the fact that the private press is not as subservient to government as the official media. According to certain critics, government wants journalists confined to the role of praise-singers, churning out official statements that make headline news while corruption, incompetence, economic mismanagement and human rights abuses go unchecked.

As Chief Bisong Etahoben argued when he was editor of *Cameroon Post*¹⁹², “afraid that unity within any professional or cultural body could work against its tall walls of oppression and repression, the Ahidjo/Biya governments made it impossible for professionals to come together as one body that could iron out the little controversies among professional colleagues...” The government, in order better to divide, has encouraged the “tendency to distinguish between members of the official and private press to the extent that even socials involving a member of the one side and that of the other can easily be interpreted as an attempt at buying the one to the other’s side.” The fact that government has been most concerned with the “excesses” of the critical private press, has further strained relations between the official and private media, as most journalists of the official media are afraid “to be seen even entering the offices of private newspapers lest they be thought to be selling official secrets,” or suspected of writing against the government under pen names.

Given that unlike their counterparts in the official media, very few journalists in the private press can boast of professional training of any kind in or outside a formal school of journalism,¹⁹³ there is a tendency for journalists of the

¹⁹² see *Cameroon Post* N° 104 April 2-9, 1992, p.4

¹⁹³ The closest most journalists in the private press have got towards receiving professional training of any kind, has been participation at the ten seminar-workshops organised by the Friedrich-Ebert Foundation throughout 1994, on the “Principles and Practices of Print Journalism,” at

official media to consider themselves professionally superior to their “marginal” or “illiterate” “colleagues” of the private press. Often, accepting that the latter are journalists as well, has been intolerable to some of them who have used CTRV and *Cameroon Tribune* to denounce “the excesses” of the private press, their “pseudo-confrères”.¹⁹⁴ They argue that one does not become a journalist simply because one owns a newspaper or because one writes in a newspaper. An attitude which Dominik Fopoussi qualifies as “snobisme” and “mégélanie”.¹⁹⁵ Through his look-down-on or know-best attitude, the official journalist has alienated his private press counterpart instead of attracting him to share in his “professional know-how”. As Chief Etahoben further remarks, the best way to show how much he knows is for the official journalist “to teach his fellow countrymen whom he knows know little or nothing,” and not simply to laugh at them struggle in ignorance.¹⁹⁶ The consequence, Eonè notes, is that relations between the official media and the private press “sont

the end of which series certificates of attendance jointly endorsed by the Foundation and by ESSTIC were delivered to some 30 participants.

¹⁹⁴ However, denouncing the private press or lecturing its journalists on the ethics of the profession, has not been confined to CTRV or *Cameroon Tribune*. Even journalists of pro-government private papers have found themselves competent to condemn their “colleagues in mediocrity”. In *Le Patriote* (N° 61 du 31 janvier, 1991, p.3), Jean Mboudou not only lectures his colleagues of the private press on the principles and ethics of journalism, but regrets the fact that in Cameroon, journalism seems to be what people turn to when they have failed everywhere else. As he puts it: “La pratique au Cameroun a malheureusement voulu que le métier de journaliste devienne celui qui reste quand on a tout perdu. L'image qui s'en dégage fatalement est celle d'un métier-fourre-tout, facile, réservé aux anciens chaudronniers et autres rejets du destin, qui n'ont pas pu trouver fortune ailleurs!” See also *Le Patriote* (N° 73 du juin 1991, p.12), for B. Ahanda's critical letter to the journalists of the private press.

¹⁹⁵ *Le Messenger* N° 260 du 30 avril 1992, p.10

¹⁹⁶ *Cameroon Post* N° 104 April 2-9, 1992, p.4

médiocres et empreints de suspicion voire de mépris réciproques” (Eonè, 1993:3). Thus bringing about what Dominik Fopoussi terms, “un schisme entre des gens de la même profession.”¹⁹⁷

Some journalists have argued that such differences or antagonistic relationship notwithstanding, it is inadmissible for journalists who are so keen and ready to lecture, ridicule, moralise and criticise others, not to muster the time and courage needed to overcome hurdles and unite themselves through a single, autonomous, professional association of Cameroonian journalists. According to one such journalist, the absence of a professional grouping is much less due to government bottlenecks than because of infighting among journalists, for, “while journalists of the government media are at each other’s throats undercutting one another for armchair positions, those of the private press are glued to a battle for survival of the fittest”. The tendency to discredit certain units of the profession and to undercut one another, has led to undue rivalry among journalists. Without press centres and clubs, “not even common professional jokes can be shared!”¹⁹⁸

The lack of such an association is responsible for the triumph by external (often selfish) pressures over public and professional interests in Cameroonian journalism. And as long as the press continues to postpone defining its own duties and protecting its rights by self-discipline and self-regulation, it would always be hassled by external forces more concerned with thwarting or controlling a press that pries and pricks. As Hilary Kebila Fokum puts it, only by discarding “the cloak of division” and forming “a strong and viable union,” can the journalists cease to “be the punching bags of influential

¹⁹⁷ Dominik Fopoussi (*Le Messenger* N° 260 du 30 avril 1992, p.10)

¹⁹⁸ *Cameroon Post* N° 117, July 17-24, 1992, p.6

personalities”.¹⁹⁹

Asunkwan of the Ministry of Communication, agrees with others²⁰⁰ that journalism in Cameroon is badly lacking in cohesion and team spirit, although he blames this on the quest for stardom: “Everybody is looking for stardom now and everybody is trying to sacrifice the other person in order to be looked upon as the star.” He argues that if his ministry has tried in the past to elaborate and impose a code of ethics on the journalists, this was only to fill the gap that the journalists themselves have created by not coming up with one. To him “the journalists in Cameroon ... are scattered as sheep on a hill”. They “are a divided and divergent body” because of the quest for stardom and because of excessive individualism and the lack of modesty and continuity. And the question should be asked:

“Can we come together to work for the common good of the profession? To make rules which guide us in our professional activity? To sanction those who break those rules? To correct, to teach the youngsters who are coming into the profession?”

He laments the fact that in Cameroon journalism remains a profession wherein “there are no elders” and where the young are not prepared to learn from the old hands:

“Everybody who comes in knocks his chest and says, well I’m here. In other professions you have respect for the elderly who are in the profession, and they somehow try to guide the youngsters who come into the profession so that there isn’t much of a difference. Everybody goes through

¹⁹⁹ *Le Messenger* N° 024 Special Edition Thursday April 25, 1991, p.12

²⁰⁰ see “Cameroon Calling” of 21/02/93

the same thing and works on to attain the common goals of the profession. But here in Cameroon, that we don't have. And I think this is the point to challenge the people of the profession. The lethargy has been too long."

Asunkwan indeed has a point when he claims the lethargy has been too long, for if under the single-party regime journalists could explain their lack of organisation and solidarity by government interference and laws limiting the freedom of association, such an explanation is hardly valid today when the legal barriers against association and organisation have been lifted. Keen as they are to blame others for their disunity and disorganisation, the journalists have not succeeded, even once, in coming together as members of the same profession to critically self-examine and make resolutions and recommendations for professional improvement. Even when organisations interested in having journalists better organised have taken the initiative to invite them for workshops on the matter, attendance has either been poor or the discussions have dwelled more on polemics and external factors than on internal causes.

Some journalists keen to have a united press, argue that the freedom currently enjoyed by the Cameroonian press, even if only token, is much more the fruit of the collective struggle for change by the Cameroonian people, than because the journalists, as such, have fought for it. Having thus failed to earn their own freedom, it is only normal for them to unite in order best to protect and foster society's hard earned freedoms.

With the on-going struggle for democracy, attempts have been made to form professional associations. Currently, there exists associations, but these are either specialised (e.g. National Association of Professional Media Women (NAPMEW), Association des Journalistes Economiques du Cameroun

(AJEC)) or (seen to be) founded along regional or linguistic lines (e.g. Cameroon Association of English-Speaking Journalists (CAMASEJ) and Federation of Cameroon Media Professionals (FCMP) of the North-West Province). As for the Organisation Camerounaise pour la Liberté de Presse (OCALIP), this is not, strictly speaking, an association of journalists. Even if most of its members are journalists, OCALIP is open to all with an interest in promoting press freedom, democracy and human rights in Cameroon. Others such as the Cameroon Anglophone Journalists Association (CAJA) created in May 1992,²⁰¹ hardly survived their first meeting. It is for the journalists to determine whether unity would best be attained through specialised associations of which the best working example for now is AJEC, or by forming a general association straightaway, with membership open to all journalists. The organisational experiences of relatively successful associations elsewhere in Africa (e.g. Nigeria), could be drawn from at the initial stage.

Patavier Walikuzu, who is sceptical about continued government interference in the organisation of journalism in Cameroon, denounces the creation, by government, of the National Communications Council (NCC) with a mission to regulate professional practice, oversee its well-being and also exact penalties to violators of agreed standards. He believes that “it is not ... for the government to create the CNCC,” which may seek to please the status quo by being arbitrary and partial. He recognises the need for a national Press Council, but argues that this must be “an independent organisation, entirely run by journalists”. He also stresses the need for a national association of journalists that: “will be for all journalists in Cameroon, the big and the small, the high and the low, the idle

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see *Cameroon Post*, N° 110 May 27, 1992, p.7

and the industrious.” For: “A journalist is a journalist, whether he works for the civil service or is working for an independent press organ. They are all journalists!”²⁰²

Whether one blames the government, the quest for stardom, individualism, or the superiority complex of some and the inferiority complex of others, for the lack of unity among Cameroonian journalists, Michel Epee²⁰³ has no doubt that divisions within the ranks of the profession, have brought about a catalogue of problems: “on assiste aujourd’hui à des dérapages et à des dévoiements qui jettent l’opprobre et surtout le discrédit sur toute la profession.” The absence of an association to regulate admission into the profession, has resulted in:

“... le recrutement anarchique par certains patrons de presse, de collaborateurs dénués de toute formation et pour lesquels le mot déontologie n’évoque pas grand-chose. Du jour au lendemain, propulsés dans des salles obscures des rédactions, plume en main, ils laissent parler leurs émotions et leur imagination au détriment de la réalité et de l’information.”

Michel Epee²⁰⁴ further argues that the lack of a professional association, has made journalists particularly vulnerable to manipulating forces in the political arena, during the on-going democratic process:

“... le mouvement manichéen né du processus de démocratisation a créé de nombreuses incompréhensions entre des hommes et des femmes censés partager les

²⁰² *The Guardian* N° 0001 Friday November 22, 1991, p.1

²⁰³ *Le Messenger* N° 254 du 19 mars 1992, p.12

²⁰⁴ *Le Messenger* N° 254 du 19 mars 1992, p.12

mêmes idéaux. Tandis que les journalistes du service public – sans doute par crainte de se retrouver sur le trottoir, ou par réflexe d’identification au pouvoir – prenaient fait et cause pour le palais d’Etoudi, ceux de la presse indépendante se sont retrouvés “prisonniers” de l’opposition, du fait qu’ils pensaient partager les mêmes valeurs.”

But because real democracy can only exist with a truly free press, Michel Epee²⁰⁵ urges members of the profession to:

“... s’organiser rapidement, et taire les rancœurs transformés en règlements de compte. Afin de devenir simplement un corps homogène, dernier rempart de l’abus de pouvoir, des violations des droits les plus élémentaires du citoyen. Pour que survive la démocratie camerounaise encore balbutiante, l’impartialité, l’indépendance, et le professionnalisme devraient constituer leur seul credo.”

Such honesty, accuracy, fairness and professionalism, should, as Patavier Walikuzu points out,²⁰⁶ be respected in practice “whatever the political stance of a particular journal” or “the individual’s personal affections”. The press should be such that it has no permanent friends nor permanent enemies, and that is best achieved through a strong, principled and active union or association.

Thus as Mayer has observed of the West, and this is applicable to Cameroon and the rest of Africa just as well, to be able to perform the vital role as defenders of democracy and liberty and as watch-dogs for the community, “journalists as individual persons need a framework of laws and collective

²⁰⁵ *Le Messenger* N° 254 du 19 mars 1992, p.12

²⁰⁶ *The Guardian* N° 0002, December 21, 1991, p.3

agreements which concretely and in detail guarantee the conditions to fulfil their task and to work under reasonable terms” (Mayer, 1993:56). Only as a body united in values and aspirations, can journalists “ensure that exceptions to the right to information are kept at a minimum and cannot be misused to hide information of public interest” (Mayer, 1993:58). Thus organised, strong and united in their values, interests and aspirations, journalists would be in a position to defend their professional interests and determine their role as a body in the democratisation of society, and not simply be pawns in the hands of external (political, economic and cultural) forces, that may or may not have the democratic aspirations of society at heart.

(iii) On the Proliferation of Newspapers

When one takes more than a passing interest in the Cameroonian press, one is bound to be struck by the number of registered newspapers. Estimates from MINAT point to over 400 titles. What accounts for so many titles? The reasons vary from the simple desire to take advantage of the 1990 Freedom of Mass Communication law that has facilitated the process of starting a newspaper, through the need to make fast money from a public freshly out of its reading-slumber and keen on national political developments, to the thirst for stardom, differences (ideological and otherwise) or the need for a medium to articulate the views and interests of particular pressure groups.

Also remarkable is the unstable nature of editorial teams, which tend to split up and for some of its members to proceed to create their own newspapers. The splits result either from disagreements over ideological issues, quarrels stemming from poor treatment of staff by publishers of already well established

newspapers, or the desire to become one's own boss and strike it rich if lucky. The following cases of splits bring out the different factors that have made Cameroonian newsrooms unstable.

Dikalo was created after its publishers moved out of *Le Messenger* in protest against the high-handedness of Pius Njawe, its publisher: Early in 1992, as already mentioned, government suspended some six newspapers including *Le Messenger*. This resulted in a decision by Pius Njawe to suspend the salaries of his staff and to place them on "congé technique". But Emmanuel Ngankam Noubissie, Thomas Eyoum à Ntoh and Jean-Baptiste Sipa thought it was not fair for their publisher to treat them with such levity owing to how much work and time they had put into the enterprise to take the paper to the first position it was occupying at the time. That aside, they found Njawe's indifference to the suspension of the paper and to their financial difficulties abhorrent. They openly wondered why in the face of such vicissitudes, he (Njawe) should go globe-trotting. This is how François Aby Donfack²⁰⁷ situates the origin of the split:

"Pendant que le journal était suspendu, Noubissie, Eyoum à Ntoh et Sipa entendent dire qu'il faut aller au congé technique, que le journal ne sorte plus jusque quand Njawe va revenir de l'exile.

Un autre problème: Njawe faisait beaucoup plus confiance à ses collaborateurs fonctionnaires aux ministères qui travaillaient avec la peur, qu'aux membres de son équipe sur place. Njawe voulait rester longtemps suspendu pour qu'on dise que voilà le martyr. La loi prévoit la suspension de journal mais elle prévoit aussi la levée de cette suspension. Mais Njawe, voulant faire la publicité de

²⁰⁷. Interviewed, 24/06/1994 in Douala

son journal ou sa propre publicité, n'a pas voulu se conformer aux conditions demandées par la loi."

Le Messenger's troubles did not end with the exit of the *Dikalo* trio. The English language desk which comprised another trio - Adolphe Mongo Dipoko as editor-in-chief, Hilary Kebila Fokum as editor, and Cyprian Agbor as production editor, got fed up with what they considered as their publisher's hawkish attitude and called his bluff. The immediate cause of the strain was Pius Njawe's refusal to allow or send an English language team to cover the April 1 and 2, 1993 All Anglophone Conference in Buea, and instead despatched a Francophone. Hilary Kebila Fokum decided to go on his own and when he returned, Njawe asked him to do a report which he refused. He received the total support of his colleagues which provoked Njawe's wrath, who proceeded to suspend the English edition of *Le Messenger*. Hilary Kebila Fokum took it as a challenge and immediately registered his own paper, *The Messenger*. He then informed Adolphe and Cyprian who readily joined him and soon thereafter, the paper was on the newsstands. However, Hilary Kebila Fokum was also to be found guilty of the same vices he had condemned Pius Njawe for, by Adolphe Mongo Dipoko and Cyprian Agbor, thus forcing them to revive *The New Standard* which had gone out of circulation.

The *Weekly Post* publisher, Chief Bisong Etahoben, left the *Cameroon Post* in October 1992 owing to what he believed was unfair treatment by his former boss Paddy Mbawa. He took along with him Ndikum Patrick Tanifom who also believed he was being underpaid and irregularly. Like *Dikalo*, Etahoben got off to a mid-stream editorial inclination. It predictably attracted the same public scorn, then, as did *Dikalo*. But before long, the *Weekly Post* had drifted from its mid-course editorial line to an

open instrument for hate propaganda against the North-West province from where all but three of his staff-reporters came. Naturally, the paper did not sell well in that province and all its staff from that province took off. Ndikum Patrick who was editor of the *Weekly Post* left in mid-July 1993 and returned to *Cameroon Post*.

Ndzana Seme, who publishes *Le Nouvel Indépendant* quit *La Nouvelle Expression* “on grounds of principles”. He accuses Séverin Tchounkeu, publisher of *La Nouvelle Expression* of having modified the editorial policy of the paper to satisfy the hidden desires of the Bamileke. This notwithstanding, Ndzana Seme has himself been accused of having a deep hatred for the Bulus whom he believes have not treated his own group, the Eton fairly. That aside, his vitriolic condemnation of government excesses is not in doubt, and he was been detained for this twice at the Kondengui prison.

L'Expression Plus was created in September 1994 by five journalists (Jean-Marc Soboth, Célestin Biake “Difana,” Gilbert Tchomba, David Nouwou and J. Bounya Lottin), who resigned from *La Nouvelle Expression* over disagreement with the publisher, Séverin Tchounkeu, on salary rates.

In the case of *La Sentinelle*, its publisher Alain Kenfack who used to work for *Challenge Hebdo*, simply wanted to grow out of his former employer’s overlordship. So he parted ways in 1993 with Benjamin Zebaze. According to François Aby Donfack of *Challenge Hebdo*²⁰⁸, Alain Kenfack started *La Sentinelle* under the illusion that one could become rich by owning a newspaper. He explains:

“... after the presidential elections we started a daily that used to make about 2 million FCFA a day. He [Alain Kenfack] saw this and believed there was a lot of money to

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interviewed 26& 27/04/94 in Douala

be made in the press. So he resigned in order to set up his own paper, *La Sentinelle*. But it hasn't quite worked. He is indebted to us at the printing press [Rotoprint] and can no longer print with us."

François Aby Donfack²⁰⁹ regrets the fact that the majority of journalists today came to the profession not because of love of journalism, but simply as a means of livelihood – 'un moyen de gagner pain':

"Ils viennent là pour chercher l'argent. Au lieu de faire vendre à son directeur 50 mille exemplaires, lui même il veut se faire vendre à lui seul 5 mille exemplaires, et avoir plus d'argent que son salaire. Quand un journal se vend, les gens ont l'impression trompeuse que n'importe où le même article va se vendre. Il faut les moyens nécessaires pour commencer un journal - suffisamment de l'argent pour pouvoir tirer les 5 premiers exemplaires sans avoir besoin de vente pour tirer le prochain numéro."

Those who are lucky enough to make some money from journalism, they invest it elsewhere "instead of ploughing that money back into the profession".²¹⁰

Afrique Horizons is a magazine published by Jean-Baptiste Sipa who felt it was high time after having worked for others for more than two decades, to settle down and become his own boss. He moved out of *Dikalo* in 1993. His magazine is very much a one-man show in difficulties. Some sources claim that Sipa left because his pro-SDF inclinations worried the rest of the team of *Dikalo*.

Ombe Ndzana is reported to have complained to no avail to *Challenge Hebdo's* Benjamin Zebaze against what he also felt

²⁰⁹ Interviewed, 24/06/1994 at Douala

²¹⁰ François Aby Donfack, interviewed, 24/06/1994 in Douala

was unfair treatment. He thought he was given far less than what he was putting in. Hence his decision to leave and start *Génération*. But François Aby Donfack thinks differently: He recounts Ombe Ndzana's relationship with *Challenge Hebdo* as follows:

“Ombe Ndzana used to contribute to us when he was with SNI. We wanted to protect him as a fonctionnaire, but he wanted his name mentioned. He said: “vous les Bamilékés, vous êtes comme ça, on fait une contribution et vous la traitez comme si cela venait de vous.” So we mentioned his name with every contribution he made. Then his problems with SNI and he was dismissed. We took him on board for 250,000 FCFA a month and paid his telephone bills which used to run to about 100,000 FCFA. He has resigned, taking away with him some of our best guys” (Interviewed, 26&27/04/1994).

These splits and instability mean that for the past four years the press has been preoccupied more with internal wrangles of its own, than with a conscious, concerted effort as an institution, to pool their resources together and fight for better laws and for persecuted journalists, as well as better inform their readership on the virtues of democracy. If journalists are more united and better organised, they could resolve most of the problems that currently plague them and their profession.

(iii) Democracy: Victim of a Sectarian Press?

One of the main tenets of this study is that the media, instead of serving as objective mediators in the current democratic process, have assumed a partisan, highly politicised, militant role, dividing Cameroonians into the righteous and the

wicked, depending on their party-political leanings or ideologies. Here we seek to understand how scapegoatism and sectarian tendencies in the media have affected their democratic responsibility as objective mediators - tolerant, critical and accessible to all and sundry.

As Philippe Gaillard has argued,²¹¹ the private press was at the forefront of the democratic struggle in Cameroon long before any legally recognised opposition parties came onto the scene. Examples: *Cameroon Post* and *Day Dawn* were seized in Bamenda in May 1990, and the former banned for over two months for carrying²¹² articles critical of monopartyism, especially a front-page announcement of the imminent launching of the SDF. Paddy Mbawa and Jerome Gwellem, respective editors-in-chief of *Cameroon Post* and *Cameroon Outlook* were detained because of their support for the SDF.²¹³ *Le Messenger* of April 24 and May 22, 1990 had seen themselves banned for carrying articles on multipartyism. These are all indications of the press playing a vanguard role in the process of multiparty democracy in Cameroon.

Indeed, throughout 1991 and 1992, some papers (*Challenge Hebdo*, *La Nouvelle Expression*, *Le Messenger* and *Cameroon Post*), their partisanship notwithstanding, distinguished themselves from time to time as a more tenacious opposition force, when

^{211.} see his article in *Jeune Afrique Plus* (N° 12, mai-juin, 1991, pp.34-38) titled "Cameroun: La Démocratie par les Médias"

²¹² N° 36 May 20 - May 25, 1990

²¹³ Anglophone journalists at this time felt that their papers were particularly targeted for censorship. In a petition dated June 12, 1990, they accused the then Minister of Territorial Administration, Mr Ibrahim Mbombo Njoya, of intimidation and of discriminatory censorship. They complained that while their Francophone colleagues were allowed to publish extensively on the May 26 events in Bamenda and on other political events in the country, they were not even allowed to quote what had already been published on the events by the Francophone press (see *Le Messenger* N° 001 Tuesday July 10, 1990, p.12 for full text of petition).

many political parties faltered by heeding to “the call of the stomach”²¹⁴. This was the case after the Tripartite talks (October 30 - November 21, 1991), the government’s alternative to the sovereign national conference requested by the radical opposition, when all the critical private papers accused those members of the “Coordination of Opposition Parties” who signed the final declaration of betrayal, of having received bribes. According to *Challenge Hebdo*, for want of “a few more dollars”²¹⁵, these leaders had fallen prey to Biya’s “corruptive offers”²¹⁶. The papers endorsed John Fru Ndi’s refusal to sign the tripartite agreement and hailed his party’s

²¹⁴ see Zebaze’s editorial, *Challenge Hebdo* (N° 0046 06 au 13 novembre, 1991, p.3) criticising opposition leaders who attended the tripartite and signed the final agreement; and see *Challenge Hebdo* (N° 054 du 08 janvier 1992, p.1) which, in: “Chairman don Tchakala” comments: “Décidément, le leader du SDF ne fera jamais comme les autres! Refuser de participer à la mascarade est très courageux de la part du Chairman, la popularité de son parti lui assurant des sièges quelque soit le mode de scrutin... Enfin un qui respecte le peuple.” See also *Challenge Hebdo* (N° 055 15 janvier 1992, p.4), for a condemnation of the politics of UNDP’s Belo Bouba Maigari in: “Que ne fera MAÏGARI pour son gari!”

²¹⁵ N° 0048 du 20 au 26 novembre 1991. According to the article (p.1&3) Eboua, Ngayap and Ndam Njoya, were accused of bending over backwards to attend the tripartite and sign the final agreement, “POUR QUELQUES DOLLARS DE PLUS”. The paper considers such leaders to be worse than prostitutes. It denounces them as “véritables caricatures de politiciens n’ayant pour souci que d’accéder dans les plus brefs délais et avec un minimum de casse, aux plus hautes fonctions de l’Etat.” The paper concluded that Cameroonians could still hope for real change, thanks to the tenacity of leaders such as “Ni John FRU NDI, YONDO Black, HAMENI MBIELEU, JJ EKINDI, Charles TCHOUNGANG et Anicet EKANE... qui n’ont pas (encore ?) succombé au charme du miroir aux alouettes proposé par Paul Biya.”

²¹⁶ N° 0049 du 27 novembre au 04 décembre 1991

decision to boycott the legislative elections. As *Challenge Hebdo*²¹⁷ put it, the chairman of the SDF had decided that he was never going to betray the people like the rest, and that his refusal to partake in “the masquerade” was very courageous. His subsequent nomination by *La Nouvelle Expression* as man of the year for 1991, was further proof of appreciation of his leadership qualities, not only by *La Nouvelle Expression* but also by the rest of the critical private press. It was a reward for “his exceptional courage, his iron resolve, his total commitment and honesty to a noble cause”.²¹⁸ When on February 12, 1993 he again was declared winner of the award, this was considered by the critical press as a confirmation of his popularity and legitimization of him as rightful winner of the 1992 presidential elections.

Eonè describes the nature and scope of the politicised press in Cameroon. To him, the editorial position of the papers:

“... reflète la sensibilité politique qu’ils ont choisi de défendre. Elle exprime les vues des partis politiques dont ils sont les sous-marins. Il s’agit à la vérité, d’une presse extrêmement politisée, militante et engagée, enfermée dans un parti pris politico-idéologique très marqué. Ce sont des journaux de soutien politique: soutient sans faille au pouvoir, soutient sans faille à l’opposition, incapables dès lors de dépasser le clivage pouvoir/opposition pour ne servir que la cause de la bonne information, objective et

²¹⁷ N° 0054 08 janvier 1992

²¹⁸ As *Le Messager* (English, Vol.II N°007 Friday, February 21, 1992, p.4) reports, “Besides re-awakening the imagery of a national conference, the award symbolises the essence of dialogue, concertation and the involvement of all around the leader in finding solutions to the problems of their community.”

exacte, débarrassée de toute arrière-pensée politicienne. Même lorsqu'elle s'essaye au journalisme d'enquête et d'investigation étayé par de nombreux documents-témoins en guise de preuves irréfutables, cela est toujours fait dans le but de gêner le camp adverse, de l'acculer à la défensive" (Eonè, 1993:6).

Eonè further argues that with such "surpolitisation chronique" goes the danger that the press will be so entangled in party-ideological wrangles as to be totally incapable of staying faithful "aux données factuelles".²¹⁹

Such involvement in politics by the media as a whole, came despite an early warning by a veteran journalist –

Abodel Karimou – who in an interview with *Cameroon Tribune*²²⁰, argued that "it will be suicidal for any newspaper to stand out as a mouth-piece for any new party," for it "should be clear that once in power, these parties will turn against the press." Moreover, any politicisation of the press was bound to bring about a loss in credibility and taste. A point confirmed by Jean Mboudou, who argues that politicisation has simply led to the manipulation of journalists by "des hommes politiques pleins de rancœur et d'acrimonie," into becoming "le dindon" of the current political farce in Cameroon.²²¹

The politicised press has attracted much criticism. Journalists have been accused of having substituted politicians. A point made strongly and repeatedly by Grégoire Owona, Deputy Secretary General for CPDM. He argues that since 1990 journalists have, believing that the politician has failed in his democratic responsibilities, become too political in their

²¹⁹ see *Spécial XVème Anniversaire Le Messager* du 28 novembre 1994, p.33

²²⁰ N° 1048, August 24, 1990

²²¹ *Le Patriote*, N° 61 du 31 janvier 1991, p.3

writing and broadcasts, while playing less and less their role as catalysts or facilitators (FFE, 1993:137-139).

The most recurrent themes in the critical private press from 1990 to 1994 attest to this preoccupation with politics. The press has dwelled repeatedly on: pillage of the commonwealth, economic mismanagement, embezzlement, fraud and financial scandals, lack of accountability, oil revenue, wastage of national resources, over-exploitation of forests, dictatorship of the state, government incompetence, poor leadership by the head of state, illegitimacy of those in power, corruption, France's pervasive presence, tribalism, Beti love for materialism and easy virtue, the Bamileke question, the Anglophone problem, human right abuses, censorship of the press, etc.

Nga Ndongo argues that by making politics "son cheval de bataille," the Cameroonian press has alienated itself from the majority of the population whose priority and daily preoccupations are in the areas of agriculture, food, health, hygiene, shelter, education, and standard of life, and not in politics as such (Nga Ndongo, 1994:26). The press, Nga Ndongo argues, has pursued its own interests, and not the interests of the population on whose behalf they claim to speak. To substantiate his point, Nga Ndongo gives the examples of famine and cholera in the Northern provinces and of cholera in Kribi, in 1991, of which "des grands journaux dits indépendants" did not report, preferring instead to reserve "leurs colonnes aux problèmes du tribalisme, de la Conférence Nationale, des "villes mortes," aux manifestations de rue à Douala, aux critiques contre "l'Etat-RDPC," aux attaques contre des détenteurs du pouvoir..." (Nga Ndongo, 1993:105-106).

By focusing this much on politics and politicians, the press has ignored or downplayed other important aspects (cultural,

economic, social) of national life. Even when these other aspects are treated, the treatment is strictly from a political point of view, the idea being to show how well or how badly the government has done, depending on the leaning of each paper. In this press, “tout se définit par rapport à la politique, d’où tout part et où tout aboutit, qu’il s’agisse de l’économie, de la culture ou du sport” (Nga Ndongo, 1994:22). Since national politics is centralised and urban in the main, the press has also tended to focus more on politics and politicians in the cities, as if this were all there is to politics.

Professionalism has also been sacrificed in the process of politicisation. Multipartyism in Cameroon has gone hand in hand with tribalism, regionalism or sectarianism, in the face of which journalists, in their numbers, have preferred to bury professionalism and muffle the truth than risk the disapproval of those whose political beliefs and aspirations they share and promote (cf. Mono Ndjana, 1994). And the fact, as Emile Awah of *Le Témoin*²²² observes, that most newsrooms of Cameroonian papers are of an “essentially tribal or regional character,” has made matters worse, and indeed explains why many papers have often acted more in defence of tribal and regional interests than professional interests.

As Chief Bisong Etahoben points out, the reason given by his counterparts in the private press “for sacrificing the truth,” is what they saw as the need to protect the revolution against Biya’s corrupt, undemocratic regime. Thus “keeping the flame of the fight ablaze” was considered most important; and sacrificing or mutilating the truth in order to attain this objective, was forgivable. Chief Etahoben differs with such thinking, “because any revolution ... that must survive only on lies and not truth, in fact anything that thrives on lies cannot

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N° 17 du 23 au 30 septembre 1992, p.2

possibly last. Truth must always triumph.”²²³

All these claims and concerns are confirmed by Guiffo in his study of media content in *Challenge Hebdo* [Bamileke owned] and *Le Patriote* [Beti owned]. While *Le Patriote* and *Le Témoin* for example, were created in order to “soutenir la politique du Renouveau” and to present Paul Biya as “un patriote en lutte contre ceux qui voulaient ramener le Cameroun vers les ténèbres,” *Challenge Hebdo* and others were created to do exactly the opposite - challenge or defy the powers in place, stage a “combat contre le régime illégitime de M. Biya”. (Guiffo, 1993:13-14 & 39). This is done by consecrating over 65% of their paper to politics, and by articulating political issues and political debate in a partisan manner:

“Confrontés aux antagonismes politiques ambiants, les journalistes camerounais se sont jetés dans la bataille politique. D’où un traitement déséquilibré et manichéen de l’information politique nationale qu’incarnent à merveille *Challenge Hebdo* et *Le Patriote*” (Guiffo, 1993:65).

“Sur le plan quantitatif, les informations politiques nationales dans *Challenge Hebdo* orientées contre le pouvoir et celles soutenant l’opposition sont largement dominantes. Alors que *Le Patriote*, lui agit en sens contraire en donnant la prépondérance aux informations politiques nationales défavorables à l’opposition et à celles favorables au pouvoir” (Guiffo, 1993:93).

Such partisanship may become too much for a paper to regain professionalism. As Guiffo remarks, in May 1992 when *Le Patriote* attempted a slight modification of its editorial policy

²²³

Cameroon Post N° 117, July 17-24, 1992, p.4

by watering down its support for Paul Biya and the CPDM, political pressure was brought to bear on it to resume its initial position (Guiffo, 1993:46).

Because journalists have wanted to substitute politicians rather than simply seeking to collect, process and disseminate information, they have ended up doing a disservice both to the politicians they support and to the democracy they claim to be promoting. Chief Etahoben, writing as editor of one of the most outspoken anti-government papers, *Cameroon Post*, sums this up very well when he says:

“One thing only the most dishonest journalists can refute about the political coverage of events in this country so far is the fact that journalists have not exhibited that much of professional probity. And I don’t exclude myself from this accusation.

In our determination to please one side or the other in the current political battles in this country, we have thrown professional ethics and good judgement to the winds and only answered to the calls of our sentiments and the ugly side of our whims and caprices. We have allowed ourselves to be swept away by our clannish, regional and sadly enough even linguistic leaning to the extent that we see no news when it concerns the other side.”²²⁴

Such overt political (dis)inclinations have resulted in “slanted reports and vicious and unsubstantiated accusations,” which, according to Chief Etahoben, have split the opposition and thus made it impossible for them to win the battle against Biya. “In their overzealousness in painting their tin-gods as angels and the other opposition leaders as satans they only

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Cameroon Post N° 104 April 2-9, 1992, p.4

succeeded in alienating their angels and satans from each other thus breeding distrust and animosity within the opposition camp.”²²⁵ But over politicisation of the media has resulted in much more than divisions within the ranks of the opposition, it has united the Beti behind President Paul Biya.

According to Nga Ndong, the Beti have been presented by this press not only as a demographic and political minority that has all the important posts in government and in the administration, but also as a people whose love for pleasure and whose laziness, incompetence, mediocrity, tribalism and penchant to steal from the state, are a danger to the national economy. The following is how Nga Ndong summarises such representation of the Beti:

“Du reste, au plan économique, les Beti sont représentés à la fois comme de simples consommateurs et surtout comme des ‘voleurs’ dont la boulimie d’argent, l’incompétence, la médiocrité et le comportement tribaliste ont plongé le Cameroun dans le marasme économique actuel. *Challenge Hebdo* n’hésite pas à affirmer tranquillement: ‘Moume Etia avait raison: il y a des gens à qui il ne faut pas confier des affaires d’argent’. L’inaptitude congénitale et incurable des Beti à la gestion des ‘affaires d’argent’ représente un danger mortel pour le pays. Ils doivent être chassés dans le désert ou même ‘immolés’. Ce châtiment s’impose d’autant plus qu’après avoir précipité le pays dans la crise politique et économique, Biya et les siens s’apprêtent maintenant à l’entraîner dans une crise morale” (Nga Ndong, 1993:131-132).

The press in question, Nga Ndong further argues, has

²²⁵

Cameroon Post N° 104 April 2-9, 1992, p.4

indulged in a cruel game of words, aimed at ridiculing the Beti. Thus as far as he is concerned, “les termes bêtise politique, bêtise incurable, bêtisation, qui ont fait fortune dans les journaux, sont, en fait, de cruels jeux de mots sur les Beti” (Nga Ndong, 1993:156).

Such simplistic scapegoating by the anti-government private press of the Beti as an ethnic group, has forced the Beti, even those dissatisfied with Paul Biya's performance as president, to bury the hatchet and support “our brother” in power. To Keye Ndong, if the private press, essentially non-Beti, has lost its Beti readership, it is because of the ease and frivolity with which this press, between 1990 and 1992, tended “à mettre à l'index ... les Bétis, sous prétexte que le président Biya en faisait partie.”²²⁶ As E. Ebongue de Ngomba argues, were the opposition and anti-government press not too simplistic in their condemnation of the Beti as an ethnic group, no ordinary Beti would have supported Biya and his regime,

“qui les affament, qui ne pensent qu'à eux-mêmes et à leurs familles, qui vident les caisses de l'Etat, expatrient cet argent, provoquant de massives compressions des personnels dans les entreprises, rendant difficile voire impossible la construction des routes, écoles et hôpitaux pendant que leurs enfants sont inscrits et se font soigner dans des écoles et centres de santé européens ou américains”.²²⁷

A similar observation is made by Célestin Monga who argues that simplistic scapegoating or collective condemnation of the Beti as an ethnic group are diversionary, for “Un paysan

²²⁶ Keye Ndong, *Jeune Afrique* (N° 1781 du 23 février au 1er mars 1995, p.65)

²²⁷ *Horizons* N° 02 du 12 juin 1991, p.2-3

de Sangmelima, dont le cacao ne s'achète plus éprouve les mêmes difficultés qu'un planteur de café de Bafoussam: un ventre de Beti n'a pas moins faim qu'un ventre Bamiléké ou de Haoussa".²²⁸

The Beti elite have been quick in making political capital out of the reductionist reasoning, simplistic analyses, and sweeping condemnation of the Beti, by a critical private press essentially of Anglophone and Bamileke ownership and control. They have argued, with much conviction and evidence, that it is not by accident that both the radical opposition parties and the most vociferous anti-government private press (*Le Messenger*, *La Nouvelle Expression*, *Challenge Hebdo*, and *Cameroon Post*) are Anglophone and/or Bamileke in origin and control. In this way it has been easy for them to dissuade their ethnic brethren - the Beti masses - from identifying with such "marchands d'illusions" who are not fighting for democracy as such, but rather, are simply using democracy as a pretext or short-cut to power for the "Anglo-Bamis".²²⁹

The Beti elite in government did little either to curb the circulation of anonymous tracts and pamphlets that whipped up sentiments of animosity and hate between Cameroonians of

²²⁸ see his article titled: "La tribu du ventre" in *Challenge Hebdo Spécial* (N° 003 du 15 octobre, 1991, p.11)

²²⁹ According to Jean-Baptiste Sipa (*Challenge Hebdo* N° 035 du 5 au 12 juin 1991, p.8-9), successive governments have been able to deny Cameroonians democracy simply by using the "syndrome Bamiléké": "La démocratie a été longtemps refusée aux Camerounais parce qu'on avait peur que les Bamiléké, tribu majoritaire supposée, ne prenne le pouvoir. Aujourd'hui encore, c'est en racontant aux paysans Bété démunis par le régime qu'ils sont pauvres "parce que les Bamiléké ont pris tout l'argent et veulent maintenant le pouvoir" qu'on les dresse contre les allogènes confondus, comme si le Cameroun tout d'un coup n'était habité que par les Bété et les Bamiléké!"

Beti origin and those from other regions.²³⁰ Thus making it appear as though what Cameroonians wanted was not really democracy, which, as the CPDM and its supporters would claim, they have had since 1982 when Biya came to office; rather, it was simply a question of other ethnic groups trying to seize power from the Beti.²³¹ The Anglophones and Bamilekes (“Anglo-Bamis”) were presented as the group most covetous of Beti power; thus the xenophobic reassurance by Joseph Owona (secretary general at the presidency) in an interview with Ndzana Seme (an Eton) in Ewondo ²³², at a period when Beti hegemony was most threatened, that never will a Bamileke be president in Cameroon (“un Bamiléké à Etoudi? Jamais!”). Such otherwise outrageous xenophobic declarations are reinterpreted as heroic attempts by courageous Beti elite to protect and consolidate Beti power in Cameroon.

Censorship of the “Anglo-Bami” press is seen as crucial for Beti stay in power. Beti intellectuals who contributed articles to Bamileke owned newspapers like *Le Messenger*, *La Nouvelle Expression*, or *Challenge Hebdo* were seen as being traitorous to

²³⁰ In an article titled “La tribu du ventre” (see *Challenge Hebdo* N° 003 du 15 octobre 1991, p.11), Célestin Monga argues that “Paul Biya joue du cynisme et de la démagogie, en tribalisant les termes de débat.” To Monga, “la stratégie de Biya consiste donc à exacerber la conscience tribale, à lui donner un contenu et une ‘justification’”.

²³¹ As Jean Mboudou of *Le Patriote* (janvier, 1991, p.4) has argued, long before the much heralded winds from Eastern Europe, Biya and his New Deal government “avait réussi en douceur à démocratiser la vie politique de notre pays” and “Il ne lui restait qu’à prendre certaines dispositions sous l’angle juridique.” What the “marchands d’illusions” wanted was not democracy, but rather, the opportunity “de partage du ‘Gari’ ou du ‘Ndolé.’” Thus “nous voyons certains Camerounais (des quinquagénaires !) se lancer à l’assaut du cocotier le plus élevé du quartier ou du village pour nous annoncer la création (légitime d’ailleurs) de leur “We too, we go chop” (Nous aussi nous allons bouffer).”

²³² see *Le Nouvel Indépendant* N° 15 du 6 janvier 1994

“l’ethnie” by collaborating with “les journaux des Bamiléké,” and some of those who refused to yield to ethnic pressure were sanctioned in one way or another. Mongo Beti, for refusing to recognise and honour a fellow Beti in power, and for preferring to champion the cause of opposition (“Bamileke”) struggle for power, would be branded a prodigal son who had “‘rien de commun’ avec les Camerounais” and ridiculed by the official media,²³³ the pro-government private press and more loyalist Beti intellectuals, for having abandoned his village and people, to become “l’homme des autres (Eza Boto)”²³⁴. Another such case, Ombe Ndzana, current publisher of *Génération*, was fired from the National Investment Company (SNI), reportedly on account of his political convictions and articles in the critical private press.²³⁵

The Bamileke journalists and papers are presented as fighting for Bamileke interests, not democracy; which according to Aaron Moselly Ebobisse of *Le Patriote*²³⁶, explains why “certains journaux peuvent houspiller le Président de la République mais ne peuvent lever leur regard sur le Chef de leur village”. Because they seek to promote ethnic political ambitions rather than democracy, such journalists and papers, it can be gathered from Albert Mbida’s and from B. Ahanda’s arguments in *Le Patriote*²³⁷, employ double standards in their

²³³ for attacks on Mongo Beti by CRTV and *Cameroon Tribune*, see *Challenge Hebdo* (N° 023 du 13 au 19 mars 1991, p.11)

²³⁴ see *Le Patriote*’s (N° 63 du 11 mars 1991, p.1-2) exclusive front-page: “Mongo Beti vu par Joseph Owona”

²³⁵ for a reaction by the critical private press and by some critical academics to Ombe Ndzana’s dismissal from SNI, see for example *Challenge Hebdo* (N° 054 du 8 janvier 1992, p.11; N° 055, 15 janvier 1992, p.6-9); *Galaxie* (N° 23 du 21 janvier 1992, p.11); and *La Vision* (N° 029 du 24 février 1992, p.7-10)

²³⁶ N° 108, du 20 au 26 août 1992

²³⁷ N° 73 du 14 juin 1991, p.10 & 12

denunciation of authorities and individuals who have used their positions in high office to enrich themselves in a dishonest way. A blind eye is passed over the excesses of Bamileke businessmen and opposition leaders “qui important du champagne et déclarent l’eau minérale à la douane” or “qui ne payent pas leurs impôts depuis des décennies”. By selectively condemning the Beti only while maintaining a conniving silence over the financial misdeeds of the Bamileke, the impression is given by the Bamileke journalists and papers that the Bamileke are without blemish, and therefore the God-sent messiahs to salvage Cameroon from Beti devastation. In Emile Awah’s words,²³⁸ the Bamileke were thus presented “comme une race supérieure, parée de toutes les vertus et ayant pour vocation de régner sur les autres tribus”.²³⁹ An ideology which has pushed *Le Messenger*, a Bamileke paper, to arrogate for itself, the mission of liberating Cameroon from the dictatorship and mediocrity of the incompetent Beti (Nga Ndongo, 1993:141-143). Through “le procédé d’autovictimisation et d’automartyrisation,” *Le Messenger*, Nga Ndongo argues, would succeed, at least abroad, in giving the impression of fighting “pour une juste cause, celle de la démocratie contre la dictature, de la liberté contre l’oppression, de la vérité contre le mensonge, de la lumière contre les ténèbres,” and in passing for a messiah “investi d’une mission de salut et de libération” (Nga Ndongo, 1993:141-143).

The allegation of close collaboration between Bamileke newspapers and Bamileke businessmen, intellectuals and

²³⁸ *Le Témoin* N° 17 du 23 au 30 septembre 1992, p.2

²³⁹ A myth *Le Patriote* (e.g. N° 138 du 22 au 28 juin 1994, p.2) has tried to puncture by repeatedly denouncing Laakam as being “ethnofasciste,” and by dismissing the idea of “le dynamisme bamiléké” as a camouflage for the dishonesty which accounts for the apparent “success” of the Bamileke in business.

politicians, has been acknowledged by a well placed insider, François Aby Donfack of *Challenge Hebdo*²⁴⁰. Talking about *Le Messenger* Donfack confessed that:

“... nous les Bamiléké sont réputés tribalistes, très très possessifs. Les Bamiléké ont construit cette solidarité autour du Messenger et l’ont soutenu avec la publicité, même quand le journal ne circulait pas bien. Les intellectuels Bamiléké écrivait des articles comme ça et lui [à Njawe] donnaient pour aller signer cela comme il voulait. Il y a autre qui l’aidait à faire sortir le journal quand ça ne marchait pas - un homme d’affaires pouvait sponsoriser le tirage d’un numéro. [...] Il y a un Kamga Joseph qui était délégué provincial pour l’information qui contribuait beaucoup au Messenger - jusqu’à être affecté ailleurs par le ministre Kontchou parce qu’il collaborait avec des journaux. Il y a quelqu’un comme Célestin Lingo, premier promotion de l’ESIY, actuellement il est au Cameroon Tribune. Mais ils se sont sacrifiés pour le Messenger par solidarité tribale.”

Njawe could meet one of these collaborators, tell them for example: “prepare for me an editorial, as Biya is going to talk on TV tonight.” This is done, he takes it and attaches his name to it, as if this were written by him. Between January 1991 and November 1992, when the struggle for power was at its peak, “Le Messenger était pour les Bamiléké comme une religion.”²⁴¹

As Emile Awah further observes,²⁴² a political leader like Adamou Ndam Njoya of the UDC, who declares in public that: “L’Ouest doit cesser de nourrir les autres provinces du

²⁴⁰ interviewed, 24/06/1994 in Douala

²⁴¹ François Aby Donfack, interviewed, 24/06/1994 in Douala

²⁴² *Le Témoin* N° 17 du 23 au 30 septembre 1992, p.2

Cameroun,” and a newspaper that finds nothing wrong with such a statement, are both, no matter how vociferous their clamour for “democracy,” certainly not fighting for the general interest of all Cameroonians. The same argument applies to John Fru Ndi who seeks democracy and power with two slogans: one (Suffer-Don-Finish) promising paradise on earth for certain groups of Cameroonians, and the other (Sangmelima-Don-Fall) forecasting doom for another set of Cameroonians. To Emile Awah:

“Par ce genre de slogans, un groupe tribal fut désigné à dessin comme cible. Le pouvoir en place fut taxé de “Pouvoir Beti” qu’il fallait absolument renverser. Par voie de conséquence, les Betis furent indexés comme responsables de la situation désastreuse du pays, notamment sur le plan économique. L’exacerbation du tribalisme fut assurée par une presse tam-tam montée et fortement financée par des groupes occultes.²⁴³ Tour à tour le *Message*, la *Nouvelle Expression* et *Challenge Hebdo*, pour ne citer que les principaux journaux, se sont employés avec le soutien des leaders politiques de l’opposition à dresser les Camerounais les uns contre les autres.”

Such tribalisation and pressure groups were so effective, Emile Awah argues, that when President Biya undertook to make a tour of the provinces in 1991,²⁴⁴ “le pays est au bord de

²⁴³ An accusation which Pius Njawa of *Le Message* finds ludicrous (see *Challenge Hebdo* N° 062 du 4 au 11 mars 1992, p.14), for “Si Le MESSAGER a des financiers, il faut reconnaître que c’est des financiers particulièrement médiocres, pour que le journal soit si pauvre.”

²⁴⁴ for a collection of speeches made by the President during these tours, see *Plaidoyer pour une vraie démocratie: Le grand périple provincial du Président Paul Biya (août-septembre-octobre 1991)*

la guerre civile: la suspicion règne, les tribus sont dressées les unes contre les autres, le peuple est intoxiqué par des mensonges distillés à grande dose par une presse missionnaire.”²⁴⁵ As Amougou rightly observes, front-page headlines like these were common: “le syndrome Bamiléké”; “Qui a voulu tuer les Wadjos” [entendez les originaires de la partie septentrionale du Cameroun]; “Les Bétis ou Bétises ...”; “Un Etat Bêti est-il viable”; “Existe-t-il au Cameroun des tribus de Présidentiables?”; “Alliance Anglo-Bamiléké, les Challengers: Cette fois-ci ou jamais ...” (Amougou, 1994:44).²⁴⁶

In this way even the most ordinary and rural Beti, who have benefitted least from Biya’s largesse, found themselves defending a regime they would normally have joined others to vote out of office. Feeling falsely and repeatedly accused of belonging to “la tribu du ventre”²⁴⁷, the ordinary disenchanted Beti, backs against the wall, threw their weight behind “le Chef de la tribu du ventre” and hoped for the best for their stomachs.

Evidence that such is exactly how the Beti press (e.g. *Le Patriote*, *Le Témoin*, *Le Courier*) and elite perceived, understood and reacted to calls for democratisation by the critical anti-government press, came to light when the editor-in-chief of *Le Courier*, Enoch Meyomessse, reacted to a front page article in *Cameroon Post*²⁴⁸ captioned: “After Robbing Cameroon Blind: THE BETIS WANT TO SECEDE!” In which article it was

²⁴⁵ *Le Témoin* N° 17 du 23 au 30 septembre 1992, p.2

²⁴⁶ for more examples of such headlines, see Boyomo Assala (1995:25-26)

²⁴⁷ Voices like A. Ebongue de Ngomba’s (*Horizons* N° 02 du 12 juin 1991, p.2-3), urging the press and the opposition to understand that “Le combat n’est pas contre une tribu ou groupe ethnique” as such, but rather, “Il est dirigé contre un régime, constitué certes de plus de bétis, mais composé des ressortissants de toutes les régions,” were few and drowned.

²⁴⁸ N° 80 August 19-26, 1991

claimed that “the rather vicious plunder of the Cameroonian national wealth has been a carefully orchestrated plan by the Betis to ruin Cameroon economically before retiring to their new nation which they hope to set up within 5 years.” In his reaction²⁴⁹, Enoh Meyomesse accused *Cameroon Post* among others, of a systematic denigration campaign against the Beti, seen as the “lousy,” “Chop-Broke-Pot” ethnic group, that has “plunged this country into its plight”:

“... it is just these kinds of verbose documents constantly churned out by the Cameroonian press that have finally aroused the desire of the Betis to secede. In other words, if there is the urge to secede among the Betis today, it is exactly because of the systematic and unprecedented denigration campaign to which they have been subjected by the national press and in which you are actively participating. Your newspaper, let me remind you, teams up with three others of the press organs which have embarked on stirring up anti-Beti sentiments in the whole country.”

If the Beti were contemplating secession, he argued, *Cameroon Post* and three other papers of Anglophone/Bamileke ownership should not express surprise because they have done a lot to propagate secession as a possible solution to the ongoing political crisis in Cameroon. He is positive that the denigration by *Cameroon Post* and others²⁵⁰ of the Beti, has:

“... played a destructive role in the re-emerging Cameroonian democracy. In what way? By the fact that you

²⁴⁹ *Cameroon Post* N° 84 Friday September, 27 - October 4, 1991, P.1

²⁵⁰ see also *La Vision* N° 027 du 30 janvier 1992 for the article by Alexandre Tagne titled: “J’accuse Les Beti,” and a similar reaction to it by Essomba Emah in *La Vision* N° 029 du 24 février 1992, p.11 & 13

have tribalised national political debates. You have taught Cameroonians that there are two kinds of Cameroonians. On the one hand, those who are good, honest, morally upright and hard working in short, everyone save the Betis. On the other hand those who are bad, dishonest, lazy, rogues, incompetent and tribalistic: the Betis. By so doing, you failed to know that through this clumsiness you were undermining the emerging Cameroonian opposition and in this way fortifying the CPDM.”

Today the results are that “the Betis have formed a bloc around the president of the republic and they are frustrating all attempts made by the opposition to unseat him”. This support for the president has come despite Beti disappointment with him because he “spent all his time investing in your [Anglophone] region while in the process, ignoring his own region of origin.”

In sum therefore, one can agree with Thomas Eyoum à Ntoh of *Dikalo* that democracy in Cameroon is “en panne,” and that the press is as much to blame for this as are the government and the opposition. The private press has, propelled by the “combat pour la liberté,” forgotten the equally important need for “l’honnêteté” in the practice of journalism. This press, he argues, has spent most of its time justifying “les multiples erreurs de l’opposition” with such spurious arguments as: “les partis politiques ne sont pas encore mûrs, les critiquer avantagerait le pouvoir”. In this way “la presse s’est substituée aux partis politiques d’opposition dont pourtant c’est le rôle de dire ce qui doit être, de proposer des programmes.” The dramatic rise in sales in 1991 only further compounded the mistaken view of the press that “leur mission fondamentale était de mener l’opposition au pouvoir.” With this attitude, journalists became advisers to opposition leaders, and it was

not uncommon to have one journalist advising three to four leaders. “Ainsi, tout flottement de leur part ne serait pas vilipendé. Et aucun ne le sera, sinon du bout de la plume.”²⁵¹

Given the politicisation of the press and given its lack of professionalism and respect for evidence, it is difficult to argue that the press has made a positive contribution to democratisation in Cameroon. The press has failed to serve as a platform for the promotion of tolerance and conviviality in a multi-cultural, multiparty Cameroon, and for the respect of truth and public interest in Cameroonian politics. As Thomas Eyoum à Ntoh so aptly puts it, the press has failed in its democratic responsibility through its complacency with the opposition, and through its failure to educate politically the Cameroonian people, or its readers at the very least. The result being that four years into the democratic process, few are those Cameroonians “qui peuvent prétendre avoir appris quoi que ce soit sur le fonctionnement et les exigences de la démocratie en lisant les journaux”. Another consequence is that: “Aujourd’hui encore, nombre de nos compatriotes ne savent toujours pas que deux adversaires politiques peuvent se parler, être des amis même sans que ni l’un ni l’autre n’ait “trahi”.” About the critical private press in particular, Thomas Eyoum à Ntoh concludes that “elle n’a pas toujours été un modèle de tolérance,” preferring on the contrary to use insults on “tous ceux qui ne pensaient pas comme elle le souhaitait”.²⁵² An attitude and approach that have alienated the people attacked, by wounding them to the point where they have vowed never again to read such discourteous papers.

²⁵¹ see *Dikalo* N° 137 du 08 août 1994, p.8-9

²⁵² *Dikalo* N° 137 du 08 août 1994, p.8-9

(v) Journalists and their Problems: Self Diagnosis

Before designing its 1994 training programme in the form of seminars and workshops, the Friedrich-Ebert Foundation commissioned me to study the needs of Cameroonian journalists and make recommendations. After interviewing journalists and visiting some media institutions, I identified the following areas of need and how the journalists, themselves, thought their current problems could be solved and their profession better organised in order to maximise performance and diminish criticism.

1.) *The need for technical know-how or craftsmanship*

The majority of Cameroonian journalists lack the technical know-how or craftsmanship needed in the process of gathering, treating and disseminating information. Most do not know what kinds of questions to ask in order to elicit the information they need from those they interview. The majority do not have the means and/or training to research for background or relevant information around a given news item; and therefore end up asking silly, superficial, meaningless questions that ridicule them in the eyes of the expert and/or the public. There is also the absence on the part of many journalists, of mastery of the art of asking questions without hurting feelings. As Hervé Bourges observed in 1993 in a comment on the Cameroonian press,²⁵³

“Avec le phénomène de démocratisation, le Cameroun n’échappe pas à une presse libre avec ses excès. Plus il y a des journaux, plus il faudra des journalistes, plus il faudra des journalistes formés. Pas seulement des journalistes

²⁵³. see “Dimanche Midi,” 14 mars, 1993

débridés qui disent n'importe quoi. C'est un métier qui a ses règles. On ne peut pas parler n'importe quoi, n'importe comment, de n'importe quelle manière."

Puis Njawe who claims not to have any personal problems at this level, however recognises that as publisher of *Le Messenger*, he employs journalists who have serious problems; problems which must be resolved:

"Even the approach to news. What is news? How do you distinguish between news and commentary? How does one edit the news out from the commentary? There is much confusion in this regard in the minds of the journalists today. To tell you the truth, we have in our newsrooms journalists who do not even know that the first rule in journalism is how to keep an address booklet ..."254

Such lack of mastery of the basics of journalism has frequently led to the publication of half truths and distorted facts. Like Fr. Tatah H. Mbuy observes, "one cannot give what he hasn't got," so the journalist must "first inform himself before informing others." Which he can do only through the mastery of his profession and through "thorough and scrupulous research to be sure of his facts".255 Indeed, as Ferdinand Ndinda Ndinda has observed in connection with the private press, "il est évident que le manque de formation de base du plus grand nombre des personnes qui y exercent explique à lui tout seul les lacunes profondes qu'accusent ces journaux."256

254 Pius Njawe (interviewed 4/12/93 in Douala)

255 *Le Messenger* N° 024 Special Edition Thursday April 25, 1991, pp.8-9

256 *La Messagère* N° 08 du 22 janvier 1993, p. 12

Most journalists lack exposure to learning practically from more qualified or more experienced colleagues and role models, because of very limited competing channels of excellence. The result of this constriction is that journalists face few challenges through reading or watching their colleagues from elsewhere. Things are not made any better by the poor financial situation of the journalists, whose salaries are often so meagre that they can barely subsist from it, if at all paid. The desire to acquire papers, magazines and books related to their profession is stifled by poverty and the ambition to excel hindered by hardship and frustration. This is so much the case that most journalists do not build up the reading habit; so that articles and books written by their colleagues and others are not exploited to the best effect. They tend to loiter only among themselves, which makes improvement rather difficult. Some do not even know the basics. Information that can permit the journalists to inform themselves prior to an interview or a write-up (literature on the different fields and aspects of society of interest to the journalist) is either not available or simply not affordable.

Even the gadgets or facilities which could help ease the job of journalists are not readily available. As Martin Nkemngu puts it, the poverty of the Cameroonian journalist is such that “what has become common tools of work for journalists in the Western world, are to us still a luxury”.²⁵⁷ These include the fax, telex, telephone, cameras, the tape recorder and the computer. There is a general paucity in materials which are instruments of work, not luxury. The custom duties are prohibitive. There is also the problem of lack of means to cover events.

Although journalists of the official press (*Cameroon Tribune*) have had some formal training in schools of journalism, they

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Martin Nkemngu (interviewed 4/12/93 in Buea)

do not seem, judging from their output, to be that better off professionally than their counterparts in the private press who have had little or no formal training in journalism. Journalists with CRTV and *Cameroon Tribune* claim that the training they received from ESSTIC (formerly ESSTI formerly ESIJY), is adequate, and that this makes them professionally superior to their counterparts in the private press. However, the private press journalists argue that although trained, the official journalists have used their technical competence to deliberately falsify facts, manipulate the population, and impose a government inspired monolithic perspective that has impoverished debate and constricted alternative outlooks. The official journalists can hardly claim to practise the techniques they acquired in school, as most of what they publish comes to them in the form of press releases and official communiqués. As civil servants, their first loyalty is more to the government as employer and manager of the state wallet. Their readers, listeners or viewers must only consume that information of which government as paymaster general approves. This has led journalists of the private press to argue that in the current context of multipartyism and democratisation, it is precisely the official journalists who have more to learn (call it re-learn) about the profession. This is how Ndedi Penda of *Galaxie* puts it:

“Because they practised journalism within the context of the single party with diplomas obtained from schools of journalism, they specialised in collecting speeches made by the president or members of his government; speeches which they were expected to faithfully transcribe and publish. They knew the editorial policy of *Cameroon Tribune*, which was such that did not authorise the critical analysis or the questioning of anything that had been said by an

official. Thus in reality, it wasn't journalism they practised; it was public relations for the government and party in power. They were civil servants, not journalists.

Today they have to learn afresh how to go out and look for information - something they never did, and how to sweat to make this available to their readers within the shortest possible time; which is what the private press is doing. So I think that they must wake up from their slumber, realise that the context is no longer the same, forget about their diplomas for a while, and go out and prove themselves as journalists. And this, they can only do if they learn the basics of the profession afresh.”²⁵⁸

Ndedi Penda's view is shared practically by all the other journalists of the private press I talked to. This notwithstanding, we must not forget to distinguish between the formally trained journalists who have not had the opportunity to implement what they learnt at school, and those who join the profession without any training, and without having acquired the basics. While the latter need to be introduced to the techniques and principles of news gathering, news writing, and news presentation or packaging, those who have had formal training without practical experience need refresher courses to keep themselves abreast with technological developments and with cases of journalistic excellence in Cameroon and from elsewhere.

Shortcomings in terms of format, presentation and quality, have been highlighted. Tjade Eonè (1993:5-6) notes, in relation to the private press, the total absence of “une presse de qualité”. He writes:

“Au plan formel, ce sont des journaux petits et légers.

[...] A quelques exceptions près, les journaux privés ont une périodicité aléatoire et beaucoup paraissent quand ils le peuvent, sous un format qui est le même (format tabloïd), une pagination qui est la même (16 pages) des annonceurs qui sont les mêmes, une mise en page quelconque et peu attrayante avec des textes touffus à peine relus et des photos généralement floues. Si cette présentation formelle est assortie de quelques rares qualités esthétiques, ils n'utilisent encore qu'une seule couleur ou deux à la fois: le noir/violet, le noir/orange ou le noir tout seul.

Ces insuffisances formelles sont révélatrices de graves limites dans leur organisation et leur fonctionnement” (Eonè, 1993:5-6).

In sum, given the level of amateurism in Cameroonian journalism, all journalists need to be conversant with new technology in information gathering, processing and dissemination. They need, in the words of Fame Ndongo²⁵⁹, to show proof:

“... de plus de professionnalisme et de rigueur méthodologique en se souciant davantage de la valeur esthétique de leur produit (correction et élégance de la langue, beauté de la maquette et de l'image), de la variété des rubriques, de la richesse des thèmes abordés, de la célérité dans le traitement de l'information, de la pertinence de l'investigation, de la vérification des faits, de la profondeur et de l'honnêteté des analyses (ne pas tirer des conclusions hâtives à partir des faits falsifiés ou non recoupés).”

²⁵⁹ see *Spécial XVème Anniversaire Le Messager* du 28 novembre 1994, p.32

The training of journalists in the process of newsmaking should focus not only on what makes a journalist, but also on the qualities of a good journalist. Kunczik (1988:233) lists intelligence, intellectual flexibility, open-mindedness, versatility, persistence, self-confidence, good general education, sensitivity, comprehension and the ability to make balanced judgments, and to talk and write well among the qualities of a good journalist. In other words, a good journalist must not be pedantic, intellectually rigid, erratic, socially indifferent or lacking in self-assurance. In Cameroon and elsewhere in Africa, the journalist needs to be “strong, courageous, socially engaged” and “willing to make sacrifices and able to stand conflicts,” especially in the face of persistent government pressures to make of him a mouthpiece. As Kunczik (1988:236) puts it, the practice of journalism in the context of a developing country should aim not at giving the very latest information which in most cases means sacrificing careful research and background-giving, but to give sense and to orientate reporting about themes important to the development of the society in the long run.

On his part Peter Essoka, broadcaster with CRTV, gives a series of musts, only the respect of which can qualify a journalist to be termed “good”:

“He must not accept brown envelopes or other material rewards before or after assignments. He must avoid conflict of interests. He must not withhold information from public unless it is absolutely necessary. He must respect an individual’s right to privacy. He must keep his bias and opinion out of news stories. He must not publish or broadcast inaccurate, careless and distorted stories. He must let the truth be his guiding principle.”²⁶⁰

²⁶⁰ see “Cameroon Calling” of 21/02/93

But he realises that this sounds utopian in Cameroon where:

“... survival and the search for a full stomach have become ideal; a society where we have stood tall because of our distorted opinions or colourful untruths; a society where any tradition is lacking to the extent where anyone or everyone has become a damn good journalist, where the profession has lost its dignity and has been thrown to the dogs.”²⁶¹

The language used by journalists must be accessible to as many readers as possible so that content can be followed without difficulty. The simple rule is that if one has something to say one must say it in the language of those whom one is addressing. The journalists must therefore learn to use language well. They must understand that the strength of a good journalistic piece is the power or level of language. Many in Cameroon today do not master the language, with the result that they present things which look like outright lies or at the very best half truths. They must also avoid the manipulation of language aimed at taking advantage of the readers. Using indecent language, insults and invectives, or calling officials and institutions names, do not necessarily enhance a journalist's case. It should be possible for journalists to convey their message with decency even in their portrayal of indecent behaviour. As Jean Mboudou puts it,

“Un journaliste qui use de violences verbales ne peut qu’être condamné. User de la puissance publique que vous confère les moyens de communication de masse pour

²⁶¹ see “Cameroon Calling” of 21/02/93

noircir autrui dans l'intention manifeste de nuire est répréhensible sous toutes les latitudes. On peut donc prétendre à la dignité de "bon journaliste," mais, une fois qu'on s'exprime en un langage injurieux, on devient un mauvais journaliste. On est en plus, un citoyen indigne, car le "gentle-man" n'injurie pas."²⁶²

If the political context in Cameroon has affected the professional performance of the trained journalists, it has also compounded the problems of the private press. The difficulties of journalists are accentuated by the uncooperative attitudes of many people in high ranking places. Over three decades of dictatorship seem to have instituted an ever present fear in officials, even the most highly placed, of the administrative axe from above. As Martin Nkemngu of *Cameroon Tribune* puts it: "The over centralised system wherein we operate make people who are experts in their domains unable to give information to the journalist. The government proclaims democracy and freedom of information, but does not hesitate to sanction even a cabinet minister who makes an un-vetted statement on a burning issue. That's double standards."²⁶³ This makes access to government held information particularly difficult for the journalists of the private press. The government, by practice, has usually not invited journalists of the private press to official ceremonies at Unity Palace and other seats of government, or as parts of government missions within or abroad. So these journalists write about the government as outsiders because they are usually chased away from official ceremonies or functions. As Simo of *L'Eveil Camerounais* puts it, "comment peut-on travailler pour le développement de notre pays quand chaque fois qu'on veut de l'information on nous bloque, on

²⁶² *Le Patriote*, N° 61 du 31 janvier 1991, p.3

²⁶³ Martin Nkemngu (interviewed 3/12/93 in Buea)

nous arrête?”²⁶⁴ This accounts for some of the inaccuracies that slip through the papers, and for the general attitude of scepticism vis-à-vis any information volunteered by government through its official channels, CRTV and *Cameroon Tribune*.

2.) *The need to define, know and respect the professional ethos*

Cameroonian journalists are yet to agree on what constitutes the ethics of their profession. They all have ideas about what a journalist should or should not do, but this is far from constituting a corpus which all journalists, irrespective of ideology and politics, subscribe to. Journalism as practised today points to the urgent need for a consensus on ethics.²⁶⁵ There is a lot of subjectivity in the papers. Little effort is made to distinguish fact from comment. Many journalists ally with one political camp or the other. They are either for or against the government to the extent that merit is seldom recognised. They tend to see things in black and white, depending on what political tune they have chosen to dance to; and consequently, to present their views of the world and their definition of things and events, as if these were the only and absolutely right views and definitions. There is thus a serious lack of objectivity or detachment.

There is therefore the need to make the journalists understand that in a plural or heterogeneous society it is normal to have or expect other perspectives. As Kunczik (1988:235-6) puts it, “Journalism training must impart technical competence but should not lead to homogenisation of perspectives or to

²⁶⁴ Simo (interviewed 4/12/93 in Douala)

²⁶⁵ see Bernard Blin (1993); Francis Kasoma (1994) and Jerome Gwellem (1994) for an idea of ethical considerations in journalism

impoverishment and constriction of world views". In talking to them about ethics of the profession, the fact must be stressed that in reality these norms are extremely difficult to realise, and that they call for extra effort from the journalist on a day to day basis.

It is true that journalists are constantly harassed by government and that their task is made difficult through the selective application of the law by the administration. This is perhaps what has led Jerome Gwellem²⁶⁶ to remark that being a journalist in Cameroon is "too high a risk to take," and that "every journalist works with one leg in his office and another leg in prison." He also observes that under such circumstances, journalism is not for the "timid and chicken hearted".²⁶⁷

For government to understand that journalists are not supposed to be uncritical mouthpieces, that it is their mission no matter how difficult to search for the truth; and for journalists to avoid being seen as irresponsible and constantly needing somebody to correct them with a whip; the journalists must be able, as a body, to present a united front. To fail in this mission is to invite intrusion and lectures on responsible journalism by government, opposition and others.

3.) *Need for job security*

Part of the malaise of the private press in Cameroon which has even contributed in keeping the press at a low level of professionalism has been the lack of job security. Newspaper publishers have capitalised on the helplessness of the jobseekers, who have not been guaranteed regular salaries. No firm arrangements are reached, as the publisher is more

²⁶⁶ *Cameroon Outlook*, vol. 21, N° 10 May 31, 1990

²⁶⁷ *Le Messenger* Vol.11 N° 008 Friday February 28, 1992, p.10

interested in commercial gains than professional excellence. This has inevitably led to prostitution by journalists or to what one may term a hand-to-mouth journalism, if not a journalism of misery. Journalists find themselves being forced to make unreliable promises to publish stories or slip in an advert here or there; promises which have led to untold problems for them. Any bit of money can lure him to write anything, including blackmail. Even with the official media, a journalist thinks that if he writes this or that flattering article about this or that highly placed person in the ruling party or in the administration, he could be recognised and promoted. This has led to infighting in CRTV and *Cameroon Tribune*. The main reason is that journalists do not receive good salaries and therefore have to aspire to extra-professional appointments which can fetch them a little more with which to make ends meet. A journalist is supposed to be well paid so that he writes what he sees. Given the current financial difficulties in most media houses, CRTV and SOPECAM inclusive, the temptation for journalists to sell their skills for ridiculous sums is bound to be greater.

Most journalists of the private press feel that the law does not protect them against exploitation and manipulation by the publishers for whom they work. Thus according to Manu Djemba of *Dikalo*, it is absolutely necessary that the law be reviewed. The law must make it more difficult for just anybody to create a paper. Newspaper owners must be people who are financially solid. To Manu Djemba,

“If the law asked everybody to show proof of financial capability by paying a deposit of 5 to 10 million FCFA, very few people would venture into creating papers, at least, not every opportunistic journalist with an eye for fast money. Journalists must be protected in order to avoid manipulation. The law in its current state fails to do that,

and makes it too easy for people to start newspapers. It suffices for someone to raise 500,000 FCFA to begin a paper. As such the minimum possible conditions are not there to assure that the paper succeeds or that the journalists work with minimum comfort. Someone who wants to create a paper today proceeds without any guarantee that he will pay salaries regularly or that his paper will last.”²⁶⁸

Like others in his position, Manu Djemba feels that the creation of a professional association might help better protect the interests of the journalists. It would also help regulate entry into the profession. He remarks that currently some even enter the profession directly from the top as editors-in-chief, without any proof that they have the experience to do the job. If there was a commission of peers to study every dossier, such things would not happen. Progress would be linear and for everyone.

For now the relationship between newspaper publishers (most of whom are themselves practising journalists) and the journalists who work for them is purely one of employer/employee; which most of the subordinate journalists find incompatible with the ethics of the profession. They run their papers like any other person does his business. According to another journalist with *Dikalo*, Benjamin Lissoum Lissoum, “Ils luttent plus du côté de leurs comptes que du côté de respect même de la profession.” For,

“If the newspaper owner had any respect for his collaborator the journalist, he would at least respect the rights of the latter. The private press lives in the informal, with journalists not knowing even what their rights are in the newsroom. Elsewhere journalists are

insured against illness and other hazards. Elsewhere as well, there are salary rates which must be respected; which is not the case in Cameroon where everybody pays what he likes. If the salary rates were fixed, there would be very few journalists; as that would naturally prevent anyone from starting a paper when he knows that he is obliged to pay a basic salary of 200,000 francs to every journalist he recruits. It is for this reason that to speak of the rights of journalists in the present private press, is too early.”²⁶⁹

Until things change for the better, he concludes, the Cameroonian journalist will continue to be treated by his publisher as “une domestique menagère”. As a journalist he is so dependent and so helpless that: “Quand je ne vois pas mon directeur, je tremble. Il ne veut pas que je tousse sans qu’il m’autorise de tousser.”²⁷⁰

Charles Kiven of *Cameroon Post*, who reiterates the need for “commensurate remuneration to motivate me in performing my job effectively,” shares this view; but thinks that things would not be this bad had the journalists a union to protect their interests and back them up in their professional activities. “Without this union the journalist will continue to be a victim of whims and caprices of the government, the public, and why not unscrupulous newspaper publishers and their family members who know that they can pay him a widow’s mite and get away with it.”²⁷¹

Union or no union, Simo, publisher of *L’Eveil Camerounais* and formerly journalist with *Cameroon Mon Pays*, believes that a way must be found to inform journalists and other editorial

²⁶⁹ Benjamin Lissoum Lissoum (interviewed 4/12/93 in Douala)

²⁷⁰ Benjamin Lissoum Lissoum (interviewed 4/12/93 in Douala)

²⁷¹ Charles Kiven (interviewed 30/11/94 in Yaounde)

staff of their rights and obligations under the labour code.²⁷² Others would simply want the opportunity to discuss with colleagues and experts what a journalist can or cannot do under the law. Has a journalist for example, the right to publish a facsimile or document on which it is stamped “confidential” or “top secret”? If not, in what way can he make use of the information contained in such a document? Sometimes journalists are held responsible in front of the law for reporting something that was said at a meeting. Just how far can a journalist go? Can he print calumnious information that has already been printed or diffused by another? Is a journalist obliged to provide proof for everything he reports on in his paper? What are the chances of a journalism of investigation within the law? What line of action should a journalist take who finds himself being arrested and molested by the forces of law and order for covering a demonstration? And what kinds of taxes is a journalist expected to pay, so that when a police officer or gendarme asks him at a checkpoint to present his tax tickets, he knows what to do? These, in sum, are many of the things that make the journalist feel insecure in his day-to-day activities, and that affect his output negatively. But as Mayer observes in his discussion of the rights and responsibilities of journalists, the press can only be independent if those working therein “have legal claims concerning the development of their professional ability and safety of their livelihood.” A journalist’s role as watch-dog and as independent mediator of information, Mayer argues, is compromised “if he cannot be sure about the safety of his place of work, if he has to struggle for sufficient income, sufficient leisure time, or if his or her workaday world does not give him or her the opportunity to gain competence in the fields he or she has to write about” (Mayer, 1993:59).

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Simo (interviewed 4/12/93 in Douala)

4.) *The need for specialisation*

Some of the problems of the Cameroonian press - superficiality, lack of research and background in most of the stories - are due to lack of specialised reporting. Everyone can write on anything, from sports to politics through economics, culture and the environment. But as Ndedi Penda of *Galaxie*²⁷³ argues, a journalist cannot be good in everything, and doing “un peu de tout” is bound to result in superficiality. This calls for specialised reporting once a journalist has mastered the basics of journalism. But it means that the journalist has access to a wide range of documents and grounding on the various aspects of the profession. Ndedi Penda suggests the creation of an association library where journalists can go to read and perfect themselves or to write well-researched and informed articles. For specialisation means exposure to excellence and to the ideas of pioneers and authorities in different aspects of the profession. Journalists therefore need to know more about specialised reporting and the possibilities that exist in this connection (e.g. Political, economic, social, religious, legal, crime, scientific, sports, environmental reporting). The 1995 training programme for journalists by the Friedrich-Ebert Foundation is entirely devoted to specialised reporting.

5.) *Needs of newspaper publishers*

The main needs of the newspaper publishers are in the areas of management and resources. They need training in management and accounting, and would like some practical experience in newspaper management with small and medium size (regional or local) media institutions anywhere in the West, especially as it is quite difficult for them to go back to school

²⁷³ interviewed 4/12/93 in Douala

for formal courses on how to run their newspaper as a business. Seminars and workshop will be the best way out. But these, as Séverin Tchounkeu of *La Nouvelle Expression* warns, must be practical not theoretical. As he puts it, “theory is good no doubt, but reality is always different. Thus the need for practical visits to the newsroom to see how a publisher runs the show on a day to day basis. How does he obtain information in the morning he gets up with nothing on his table? What are his relations with the news staff like? We no longer want seminars where people come and talk with no practical bearing.”²⁷⁴

To run his paper in a way that brings him profit, the publisher must know his market and what its expectations are. This is achieved through public opinion polls, and the publishers are interested in being educated on how they are conducted, interpreted and used. If the publisher is to make his paper a profitable business, he must remember, as Charles Garside of the defunct *The London Evening News* points out, “that the most important people on a newspaper are not the owners, the editors, the journalists or the staff as a whole - the most important people are the readers who pay their money to buy the paper” (Garside, 1993:71). Journalists, he notes, “may write the most wonderful stories in the world but if there are too few readers willing or able to buy the product, business will fail and the quality of content will be lost” (Garside, 1993:69).

As concerns resources, the main cry of the newspaper publishers is the cost of production. The cost of paper and printing is very high, and custom duties are exorbitant. So much goes into the production of a paper that what comes out in terms of profit is chicken feed. The publishers complained that although theirs was the century of modern structures characterised by electronic printers, computers and sophisticated facilities in the rapid collection, treatment and

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Séverin Tchounkeu (interviewed 4/12/93 in Douala)

dissemination of information, their own structures, most unfortunately, remained archaic and unprofessional. What must they do to get the news dispatches from the big agencies in time, if at all? How do they obtain the computers and fax machines that are indispensable in this day and age? How do they obtain these facilities at costs commensurate with the meagre means at their disposal?

Their prospects are gloomy, especially with the recent salary cuts and devaluation. Pius Njawe, inspired by the Canadian experience, suggests the creation of “un groupement d'intérêt commun (GIC)” of all interested newspaper publishers to acquire with the help of international funding agencies, a modern technologies, which it can manage to the benefit of all.²⁷⁵ The idea was shared by most of the other journalists. Sylvester Gwellem²⁷⁶ believes that it is only by organising newspaper proprietors into a guild of this kind that problems such as “rampant stillbirths in the private newspaper industry,” could be overcome. Through the guild proprietors could put their heads together, contribute money and probably buy printing machines, newsprint and delivery vans, or provide some logistics that are now a bane to the industry. The ideal for some would be a network where their papers can be word processed, edited, formatted and printed with minimum cost.

Others however expressed reservations, wanting to know what would happen to Rotoprint which already prints the quasi totality of the private press. But the fact, as Alain Kenfack of *Le Sentinelle* pointed out, is that the Cameroonian market is much too reduced, and the cost of production much too high, for every paper to seek to have its own printing press or to continue to pay exorbitantly to be printed.²⁷⁷ For this idea of a

²⁷⁵ Pius Njawe (interviewed 4/12/93 in Douala)

²⁷⁶ *Cameroon Tribune* N° 1080, Friday December 14, 1990, P.12

²⁷⁷ Alain Kenfack, (interviewed 4/12/93 in Douala)

collective press to work, the publishers count very much on international assistance.

For publishers to make their newspapers real businesses, they must seek to attract advertising by showing proof of high circulation. They must also make their papers less partisan and more neutral as information mediators. If currently there is little advertising in the press, and if industry and commerce behave as though advertising were doing publishers a favour, this is due largely to the very unprofessional approach to journalism of which the press is guilty. Increased professionalism would lead to high circulation and more advertising, and consequently, more revenue for the publishers to invest in new technology.

To conclude this section, it suffices to say that such organisation of the profession as discussed above is indeed imperative, if the media and journalists are to play a positive and significant role in the democratic process in Cameroon.

vi) After the National Forum on Communication: What Next?

The National Forum on Communication in Cameroon was held in Yaounde from August 29 to September 1, 1994. Its opening ceremony was attended by an estimated 2000 participants. Journalists, photographers, cameramen, printers, publishers and telecommunication engineers had earlier been mobilised to attend preliminary sessions in the provinces. Resolutions were prepared and each province sent to the National Forum 10 delegates. Also invited to attend and present papers were communication researchers, scholars in law, political scientists and academics from other disciplines.

In his opening speech, the Minister of State for Communication urged the participants to think, examine,

question and propose. He asked them not to leave any stone unturned, but to weigh, prescribe and even revolutionise the media landscape of Cameroon. The way discussions were conducted in the various workshops led to allegations in the critical private press and among observers that pro-government participants had been planted in these workshops to sabotage attempts at meaningful change. In a dramatic exchange of insults, Henri Bandolo, former Minister of Information and Culture, accused the Minister of Communication of having deliberately invited his friends from the University (referring to Professor Roger Gabriel Nlep) to sabotage a forum that should in the first place have been strictly limited to professionals of communication. In workshop N° 2 for instance, participants spent over six hours arguing on who a journalist is. Although charged with studying and recommending on a code of ethics for journalists, it was not until the final day that the ministry makes available to the workshop 12 sample codes of ethics to serve as a guide.

There is a school of thought, even amongst participants, that saw the forum on communication as basically pointless, given that the constitution of Cameroon, which in principle should determine the media law, remains what it was during the one-party era. The argument was that calling for a National Forum on Communication before a constitutional conference was synonymous to putting the cart before the horse. The same opinion argues that the absence from the forum, of MINAT (seen by journalists as the architect and propagator of administrative censorship) and of parliamentarians, was reason enough to doubt that any decisions arrived at would be taken seriously by government. Those who shared this view were quick to point at press reports of differences within the ranks of government over forum resolutions, as a justification of their fears.

These procedural problems, difficulties and differences notwithstanding, the participants went to work, and at the end of the forum, it was resolved, *inter alia*, that:

- Freedom of the press and the freedom to communicate be enshrined in the constitution as a law, and that all arms of government be proscribed from doing anything to violate these freedoms;

- A communication code comprising all legislation on communication, local or foreign, be created. The code should clearly define, *inter alia*, what makes a media enterprise, its by-laws and organisation; and should reiterate the need for communication to be free, the public's right to information, the need for the audio-visual media to be accessible to all shades of opinion, the need for 80% of electronic media content to be reserved for Cameroon programmes, and the need for information on government activities and decisions to be made available to all and sundry. It should also determine the mechanisms by which public radio and television could be freed of overwhelming government control and made more plural in their political and cultural contents;

- Administrative censorship of the press be outlawed, and that the courts be made the only legal institution for correcting journalistic excesses;

- Government monopoly over the audio-visual media be ended, and that individuals and interest groups be given the franchise to create and operate their own radio and TV stations in accordance with article 36 of law N° 90/052 of December 19, 1990 on Freedom of Mass Communication;

- A truly independent Higher Authority on Communication be created with power to oversee and direct media operations in Cameroon;

- The penal code be purged of the sanction pertaining to

“tendentious commentary” seen to be clearly out of place in a democracy;

- A code of ethics be drawn up and adopted by journalists, not politicians or government; and that this code of ethics be designed along the same professional and universally recognised standards but that it be adapted to the Cameroonian context;

- A National Order of Journalists be created, and that journalists of the public media be encouraged to create their own association, syndicate or federation;

- A National Press Foundation be created to manage public and international aid to the press. And that international organisations invest in the area of training through scholarships and the funding of exchange programmes. They should encourage refresher courses especially for those without formal training in schools of journalism ;

- National industries be developed to manufacture communication and telecommunication equipment for local consumption, and to cater for local needs in paper, spare parts and equipment. That traditional communication technology be identified, revalorised and disseminated. That special measures be taken to lessen the financial burdens on media institutions in matters of postage, etc. And that firms and organisations be encouraged to invest in advertising through preferential measures.

At the end of the forum the general feeling of participants and the press was that the ball was now in the government’s court. Most feared that nothing significant will come out of it, using the tripartite talks of 1991 as a case in point of government’s lack of goodwill to implement consensual resolutions. And so the attitude remains that of wait and see.

In this study we set out to examine whether or not the mass media have played a positive and significant role in the democratisation of Cameroonian society from 1990 to 1994. The main hypothesis or guiding idea of the study was that the mass media have not succeeded to contribute in any significant and positive way to the democratic process in Cameroon through informing the public on democratic values, by revealing all threats to democracy, and by applying democratic instruments themselves in their practice of journalism. To verify this hypothesis, we looked at (a) the political and legal environment within which the media and journalists operate, (b) the economic and financial situation of media institutions and journalists, and (c) the level of professionalism amongst media practitioners. What follows is first a recapitulation of our findings, and then a prescription on how best the media could function in the interest of democracy in Cameroon.

(i) What Role have the Media Played in the Current Democratic Process?

Concerning the political environment wherein the media operate, we found out that the one-party logic, of which government, opposition and the public are guilty, has prevented Cameroonian multipartyism from addressing the major issue: that of how best to bring about real participatory democracy. The momentum and enthusiasm for change generated with the rebirth of multipartyism petered out shortly after the presidential elections of October 1992, when the public learnt that democracy is not necessarily having as president the most popular person. Thus the bulk of

Cameroonians, despite the re-introduction of multipartyism, continue to be compelled to abide by decisions taken without their consent or participation. They continue to have little impact even on their most pressing problems and interests, as the political, economic and social changes that they yearn for are being planned, executed or thwarted according to the one-best-way logic of the one-party era. Democracy is yet to become a way of life – a culture – in Cameroon; so far, I think, it has served mainly as a face powder, an empty concept or slogan devoid of concrete meaning used to justify reactionary propaganda by the CPDM and its acolytes on the one hand, and revolutionary propaganda by the opposition and some pressure groups on the other.

This polarisation in the Cameroonian political arena corresponds to a similar polarisation in the Cameroonian media. In the on-going democratic debate, the media have not played the role of objective mediators. One can identify two main political tendencies in the media: first, there are those who argue that all the government does is good and in the best interest of Cameroon, and that the radical opposition is void of patriots and motivated only by selfish, regional, or ethnic self-interests. These comprise the publicly owned, government-controlled CRTV and *Cameroon Tribune* on the one hand, and pro-government “privately” owned newspapers such as *Le Patriote* and *Le Témoin* on the other.

Second, there are those who claim that all the radical opposition does or stands for is in the best interest of Cameroon, and that the government and its allies are only motivated by a stubborn love of power and other selfish pursuits. These comprise the bulk of the privately owned papers, amongst which are such regular publications as *Le Messager*, *La Nouvelle Expression*, *Challenge Hebdo*, *Galaxie*, *Cameroon Post* and *The Herald*. The media are therefore,

polarised into two diametrically opposing camps, each claiming to know and represent the best interests of the Cameroonian people.

By focusing this much on politics and politicians, the press has ignored or downplayed other important aspects (cultural, economic, social) of national life. Even when these other aspects are treated, the treatment is strictly from a political point of view, the idea being to show how well or how badly the government has done, depending on the leaning of each paper. Since national politics is centralised and urban in the main, the press has also tended to focus more on city politics and politicians, as if this were all there is to politics.

Pertaining to the legal environment, we observed that although certain aspects of the draconian press law of the one-party era were liberalised in the Freedom of Mass Communication law of December 1990, the selective application of the law has been to the detriment of the critical private press, and has made it very difficult for this press to have the freedom and independence it needs in its democratic responsibilities. If one were to judge by the intensity of censorship, the number of seizures, suspensions or bans, the cases of intimidation, invasion or sequestration by the police or military, the level of indifference and hostility to the press by the president and his collaborators, it would be difficult to claim that the December 1990 law has changed much in practice. Whether actually fighting for democracy or simply using it as an ideology, the critical private press has been successful in presenting itself, thanks to the repressive application of the law, as victim of a government unwilling to provide practicable instruments for real democracy. In this way, the critical private press could be said to have contributed in unmasking government's reluctance to undertake a significant and wide-ranging democratisation of society in Cameroon.

The private press thus muffled through the selective application of the law, the government finds itself neither with a viable opposition, nor with critical media, especially as the CRTV and *Cameroon Tribune* are under its exclusive control. And what contribution to democratisation by the press is possible in a context where only one voice, only one way of seeing, thinking and doing is tolerated? How can the press play a positive role in the democratisation of Cameroon when the law, even in its imperfection, is not applied in a clear, consistent and just manner?

At the level of the media, we maintain that if the law on Freedom of Communication and its implementation have made it difficult for the private press to operate freely and to contribute to the democratisation of society by providing access to alternative voices, the private press has on its part compounded that difficulty with its unprofessional practice of journalism. The private press has seen democracy in purely political terms, and defined the democratic process as the struggle between those who have Cameroon's best interests at heart and those who are out merely to satisfy selfish interests and greed for power. Depending on what side of the political spectrum a paper finds itself, truth is either from the opposition or the government. There is little respect for evidence. Journalism has become an exercise in turning a blind eye on the shortcomings of those a paper supports, while highlighting and/or exaggerating the weaknesses of those a paper opposes.

Professionalism has thus been sacrificed in the process of politicisation. Multipartyism in Cameroon has gone hand in hand with tribalism, regionalism or sectarianism, in the face of which journalists, in their numbers, have preferred to bury professionalism and muffle the truth than risk the disapproval of those whose political beliefs and aspirations they share and

promote. Because journalists have wanted to substitute politicians rather than simply seeking to collect, process and disseminate information, they have ended up doing a disservice both to the politicians they support and to the democracy they claim to be promoting.

We have argued, in essence, that such partisan journalism, no matter how attractive it may be to people desperate for change or desperate to maintain the status quo, is little informed by the professional canons of honesty, accuracy and fairness that are supposed to make of every news-story a value-free product accessible to all, irrespective of sex, religion, ethnic origin, culture or political ideology. The ability of politicised or partisan journalism to give all sides of the story, to avoid biased language, comment and opinion in news-stories and reports, has been crippled by the tendency to break Cameroonians down into the “righteous” and the “wicked” depending on whether they are in opposition or in government. The impression is given that being good or bad is much less a question of what one is or what one does than a question of where one stands politically. Such partisanship blinds the journalists to their professional beliefs and ethics.

The media’s potential as objective mediators in the democratic struggle has been affected negatively not only by the legal and political environment and by the lack of professionalism, but also by the absence of organisation, unity and solidarity among journalists. Organised, strong and united in their values, interests and aspirations, journalists would be in a position to set their own agendas and determine their role as a body in the democratisation of society, and not simply be pawns in the hands of external political forces, that may or may not have the democratic aspirations of society at heart.

Given the politicisation of the press and given its lack of professionalism, organisation, unity and solidarity, it is difficult

to argue that the press has made a positive contribution to democratisation in Cameroon. The media have failed to serve as a platform for the promotion of tolerance and conviviality in a multi-cultural, multiparty context, and for the respect of truth and public interest in Cameroonian politics. The media have failed in their democratic responsibility through their complacency with the opposition or the government, and through their failure to educate politically the Cameroonian people, or its readers at the very least. The result being that four years into the democratic process, few are those Cameroonians who can claim to have learnt by way of the media any basic lessons on democracy, its virtues, exigences and implementation.

(ii) How Best Could the Media Contribute to Democratisation?

Given the current difficulties facing the media in their democratic responsibilities vis-à-vis the Cameroonian society, one is bound to think of the best way forward.

To democratise is to bring about change, and that to change is to challenge vested interests. Any of the media therefore, which decide, in earnest, to play an active and positive role in this process, are likely to work in a hostile environment if the establishment or existing attitudes and practices are not in tune with the spirit of change. For to democratise means to question basic monolithic assumptions, conventional wisdom about government, power myths and accepted personality cults, and to suggest and work for the demystification of the state, custom and society.

The mere call for an exploration of alternatives by the media is bound to be seen as a threat and a challenge by those who have championed the cause of one-dimensionalism; that

is, those who benefit from the maintenance of the status quo, and who stand to lose from any changes. They cannot withstand the challenge, stimulation and provocation that democracy promises. They want life to go on without disturbance or fundamental change; and they are well-placed to ensure this.

If democracy is what Cameroonians want, it could be advocated that the media assume the responsibility of facilitating this process by adequately informing, explaining and educating on the importance of democratic pluralism; by socialising, coordinating and helping towards a democratic consensus or commonality of democratic values; and by working towards a reduction of such social tensions and cleavages that often give dictatorship the excuse to decree pluralism anathema.

If they must help adequately in the demanding process of democratisation, the media must give themselves the responsibility of: collecting information of likely interest and relevance to people thirsting for democracy; selecting, processing and disseminating information in a way that does not compromise this aspiration; educating the general public on the virtues of tolerance; expressing editorial opinion that decries all attempts to put the clock back; giving 'background' information and guided comment to put things in perspective; acting as critic or watchdog on holders of power, especially in a situation like Cameroon's, where the judiciary and legislative are far from independent; expressing or reflecting real public opinion (as opposed to the imagined and the faked); providing a platform or forum for varied points of view; and reminding themselves that although they have an interest to keep in business and to make profit, or simply to earn their daily bread, they have the even nobler responsibility of championing the cause of truth and freedom.

In other words, the media must adopt and live the democratic culture. Democracy to them must become a way of life, not a face powder to be experimented with and discarded after an initial try-out, and not a superficial coating to be applied when the time seems right. The media must discover, in practice, that freedom has its limits and constraints, and that every group, every institution, every country has its rules and regulations, its laws; and that once these are agreed upon by the recognised (legitimate) decision-makers, no one has the right to violate them. It must never be forgotten that a person's freedom ends where that of another begins, and this is handled by law. A community can only stay strong and united if its laws are just, firm, applied strictly and respected by all.

The media must acquire and live the virtue of tolerance, for democracy also means: respect for the rights and opinions of others; accepting the differences of others; reciprocity in the obligations of people in respect of others. The media must always understand that one man's meat is another man's poison - which implies that other values of reference, other ways of seeing and doing things, other schools of thought, exist, and must be taken into account. Their commitment as media must always be to truth and freedom for all and sundry.

In doing all this, the media must make an attempt to detach themselves from pressures of every sort. Often, the media tend to think, quite mistakenly as we have seen, that the only real threat to their freedom and independence comes from government. There is the threat from big business as experienced in the West and some parts of Africa, but there is the equally dangerous threat of quite unwittingly playing into the hands of the power elite in the opposition. For the media must bear in mind that to oppose does not necessarily imply to aspire for or to promote democracy. Experiences abound of people who have hidden under the cloak of democracy and

concern for the public good, to catapult themselves into positions where they have excelled in nothing but dictatorial excesses. Thus the media are just as liable to be corrupted or constrained by external financial interests and by the opposition as they are by the government. The media can therefore truly call themselves “independent” if and only if they are indeed independent from government, the opposition, powerful business interests, and any other pressure group (religious, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, etc.). The media must therefore unfetter themselves to become veritable champions of democracy and public interest.

The observation and interpretation of facts are the primary concern of journalists. In schools or institutions of journalism, they are taught to do their utmost to separate their own opinions about an issue from their reporting of that issue. And are told that unless they can detach themselves from their prior values and beliefs in this way, their prejudices and personal biases (wishes, motives, emotions) might lead to the misinterpretation or distortion of the very phenomena they want to clarify. But the politicised journalists approach their news-gathering with a set of attitudes and opinions which have often biased their news-reporting in favour of their political leanings. There is thus a need for journalists to understand that social truth is a matter of consensus between competing perspectives, especially in a plural context like Cameroon where how one perceives a phenomenon is contingent on one’s cultural or ideological standpoint.

If the journalists and media are to make an active and positive contribution to democratisation, their focus must be on the common denominators, and not on what puts them asunder. They must also understand that democracy has its cultural, social and economic dimensions as well, and so does journalism. In news-writing and reporting, the journalist, to

paraphrase Kunczik (1988:235-6), must not be aggressive and negative, but critically distant and fair. He must always ask himself: Is my report fair?; and must avoid sensationalism and the deliberate falsification of facts. Journalists must also avoid scapegoatism - that is, giving the impression that there is an individual, a group (ethnic, linguistic, religious, political, cultural, etc.) or a section of society that is responsible for all the problems in that society.

If sufficient care is not taken to choose and pick meticulously, and if a conscious attempt is not made to avoid the temptations of self-interest or the trappings of primordial bonds of blood, tribe, language, region, religion, and custom, the media are likely to end up doing a great disservice to democracy, even in the form of multipartyism. Thus they could find themselves, quite unintentionally at times, “misinforming” through bias in selection or through misrepresentation. The same prejudices or bias could result in their interpretations or comments serving as mechanisms for control and frustration of alternative voices and outlooks.

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In the on-going democratic debate, the Cameroonian media have not played the role of objective mediators. A one-party logic, of which government, opposition and the public are guilty, has prevented Cameroonian multipartyism from addressing the major issue: that of how best to bring about real participatory democracy. So far, democracy has served mainly as a face powder, an empty concept or slogan devoid of concrete meaning used to justify reactionary propaganda by the ruling party and its acolytes on the one hand, and revolutionary propaganda by the opposition and some pressure groups on the other. This polarisation in the Cameroonian political arena corresponds to a similar polarisation in the Cameroonian media. One can identify two main political tendencies in the media: first, there are those who argue that all the government does is good and in the best interest of Cameroon, and that the radical opposition is void of patriots and motivated only by selfish, regional, or ethnic self-interests. These comprise the publicly owned, government-controlled electronic and print media on the one hand, and pro-government “privately” owned newspapers on the other. Second, there are those who claim that all the radical opposition does or stands for is in the best interest of Cameroon, and that the government and its allies are only motivated by a stubborn love of power and other selfish pursuits. These comprise the bulk of the privately owned papers. The media are polarised into two diametrically opposing camps, each claiming to know and represent the best interests of the Cameroonian people.

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